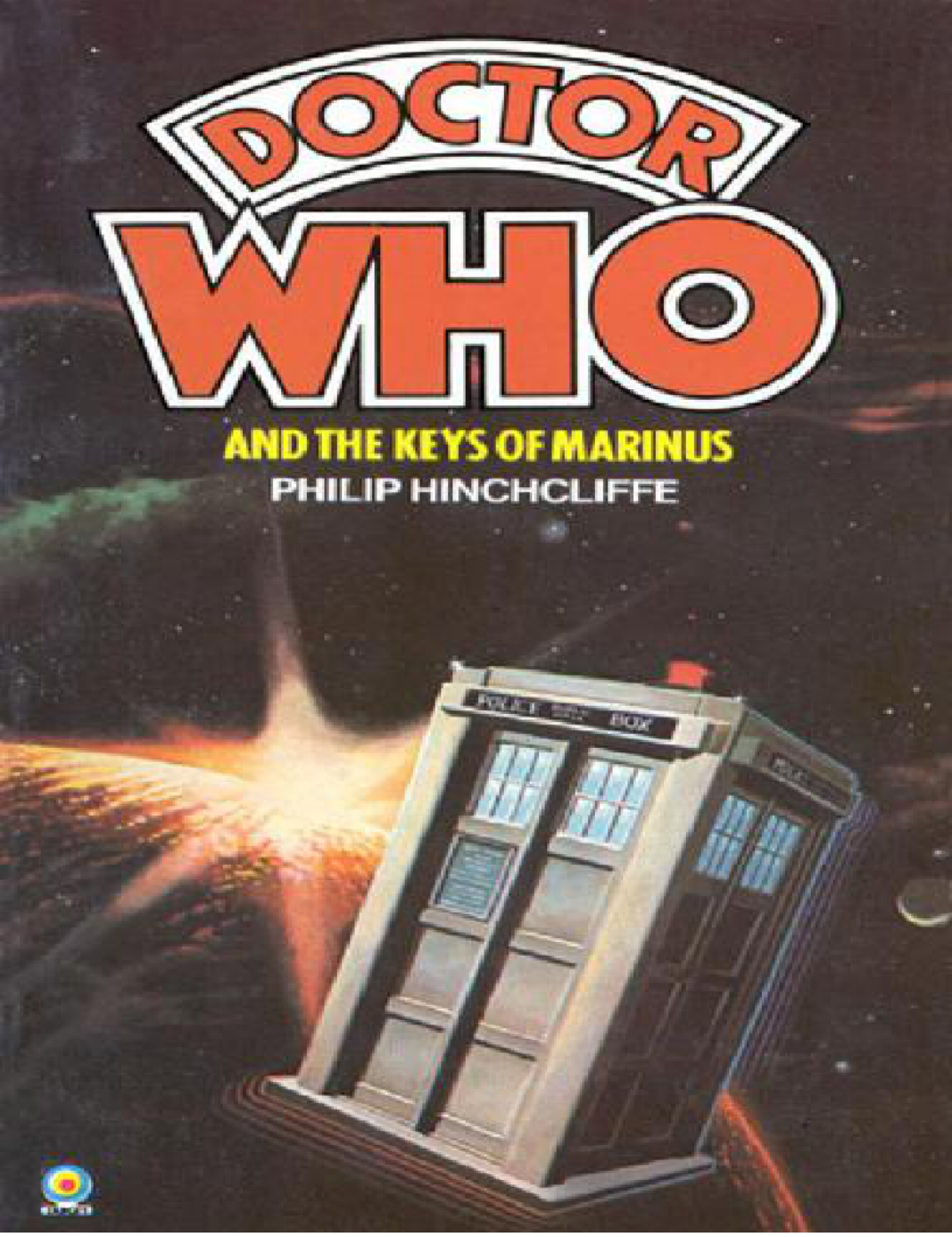
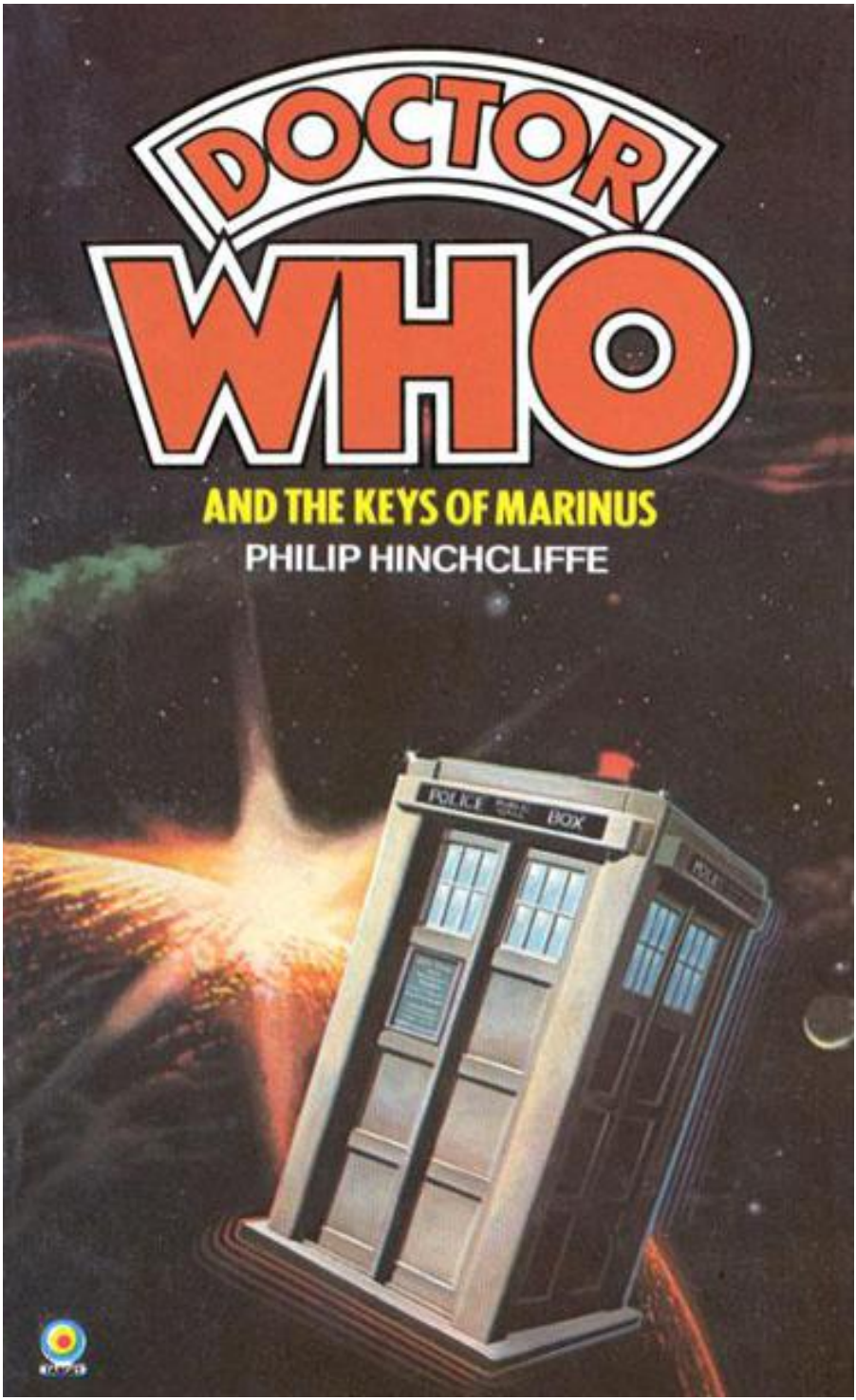
DOCTOR WHO

AND THE KEYS OF MARINUS

PHILIP HINCHCLIFFE




DOCTOR
WHO
AND THE KEYS OF MARINUS
PHILIP HINCHCLIFFE
POLICE BOX

MARINUS

a remote force-shielded island set in a sea of acid, governed by

THE CONSCIENCE

the ultimate computer which rules and balances the gentle life of Marinus, guarded by

ARBITAN THE KEEPER

ruthless protector of a peace-loving race threatened by

YARTEK

Warlord of the brutal sub-human Voords, sworn enemy of Arbitan and of Marinus, who has within his grasp

THE KEYS OF MARINUS

the Conscience's vital micro-circuits, the doors of good and evil.

Can the Doctor find the hidden circuits in time? Arbitan's command was 'Find them, OR DIE!'

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DOCTOR WHO

AND THE

KEYS OF MARINUS

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CONTENTS

1 The Sea of Death

2 The Marble City

3 The Velvet Web

4 The Brains of Morphoton

5 The Screaming Jungle

6 The Whispering Darkness

7 The Snows of Terror

8 The Demons

9 Sentenced!

10 The Mystery of the Locked Room

11 The Missing Key

12 Arbitan's Revenge

13 Final Goodbyes

1

The Sea of Death

The day—like every day on Marinus—started clear and bright. The walls of the Great City shimmered in the early morning heat and, a mile away, the dazzling green sea washed gently against the silver shore. Between the two lay a terrain of twisted, gleaming rock, as if molten glass had spilled from the ground and solidified before reaching the sea. This desolate, burnished landscape was devoid of life. Only the sun, throwing creeping shadows into the numerous rock pools, lent movement to the scene.

At 701 zeniths (Inter Galactic Time) precisely, three BXV

sub-oceanic assault craft penetrated Marinian territorial waters at a depth of fifty sonars. Fitted with anti-metradar devices, they sped undetected to within one hundred yards of the shore before surfacing and slithering onto the wide beach. For several minutes the BXV's lay there, glistening in the sun like giant slugs.

Then, one of the outer casings was pushed open and a shiny black hand emerged, its webbed fingers clawing the air for support.

The Voord invasion of Marinus had begun.

Barbara Wright, a pretty, dark-haired English teacher from Coal Hill School, North London, clenched her fists bravely and held her breath. A whining noise pierced her ears and her stomach floated to the ceiling. She reflected miserably on her inability to cope with Space-Time travel.

Human bodies were not built for it, she told herself, at least not hers.

She glanced across the Control Room at Ian Chesterton, her fellow teacher from Coal Hill. He appeared to be enjoying himself, staring wide-eyed at the jumble of flashing lights which charted their spaceship's descent. They were inside a large hexagonal-shaped control room with white hexagonal-patterned walls. A hexagonal console in the middle of the room supported a transparent cylindrical column which moved slowly up and down when the ship was in flight.

Next to Ian, deep in concentration, was the owner of the spacecraft. He was an old man with an upright, alert stance, and a dignified expression. He had flowing white hair and mischievous blue eyes. He was dressed like an eccentric Victorian professor (dark frock-coat, winged collar and tie, checked waistcoat and trousers).

He carried a wooden walking stick which he shook vigorously in the air when arguing, which was often. He was known as 'the Doctor'.

There was one other person in the spaceship, a young girl of about fifteen. This was Susan, the Doctor's grand-daughter. She was a petite, chirpy girl with short, black hair (cut like a boy's), wide saucer eyes and an infectious grin. A pupil at Coal Hill School, she had always been extremely clever, and 'different' from the other girls. Intrigued, Barbara and Ian had investigated her home life and discovered she was living with her grandfather in a London police box! The police box, however, was far from ordinary. For a start, it was larger inside than out, a phenomenon accounted for by the Laws of Time and Relative Dimensions in Space, as Barbara and Ian subsequently learned. The interior of the police box resembled a spaceship, capable of travelling through Space *and* Time. It could, moreover, change its appearance like a chameleon to suit any environment. This incredible craft was known as the TARDIS. The Doctor was perfectly at home in it and treated each nerve-wracking journey like a fivepenny bus ride. He rarely landed up where he intended but this only added to his enjoyment.

The Doctor did not suffer fools gladly and his insatiable appetite for solving scientific problems always took precedence over more mundane matters. In this respect Barbara felt he was ‘not quite human’. Moreover, Susan rarely spoke of the Doctor’s origins, or of how he came to possess his extraordinary spacecraft. Thus, although the two teachers had grown to like him, an air of mystery always clung to the Doctor in their eyes.

Barbara’s thoughts were interrupted by a violent juddering as the TARDIS jolted to a standstill.

‘A perfect landing,’ chortled the Doctor. Barbara looked anxiously at Ian. Where were they this time?

Ian leaned over the console. He was dressed in a flowery, Chinese jacket (acquired at the court of Kublai Kahn) which rather undermined his air of schoolmasterly interest. ‘Any radiation?’ he asked the Doctor casually.

‘Nothing to speak of. The counter’s hardly registering. Let’s see what the place looks like.’ The Doctor fiddled with the scanner switch.

A picture appeared on the screen.

‘Oh look, that’s the sea, isn’t it?’ said Barbara.

‘Where are we?’

They all stared for a moment at the strange-looking coastline.

‘Can we go outside and look? Please, Grandfather...

Can we?’ Susan begged.

‘Yes, yes, I don’t see why not. There doesn’t seem to be any danger.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ agreed Ian doubtfully. He was still staring at the screen. The others waited for an explanation. ‘Well, when the scanner started, I thought I saw something move... but it was probably just a shadow.’

‘Then let’s go out and look around,’ said the Doctor.

He pressed a button on the console and the doors slid open. The TARDIS had landed on the edge of a beach and the four travellers emerged into brilliant sunshine.

The ocean stretched before them like a piece of vivid green silk.

Susan looked longingly at the water. ‘Do you think it’s safe to go for a swim?’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘Not for the moment. We don’t know what creatures may be lurking below the surface. Come on.’ The Doctor set off down the beach and the others followed.

A few moments later a dark shape flitted silently across the rocks towards the empty TARDIS.

‘It’s very quiet, isn’t it?’ whispered Barbara uneasily.

‘You’re right. No birds or anything,’ replied Ian.

A little way ahead the Doctor suddenly called out.

‘What d’you make of these, Chesterton?’ He held up a handful of small pebbles. ‘Fascinating, aren’t they?’

Ian took one and examined it carefully. ‘It’s glass, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, yes.’ The Doctor nodded excitedly. ‘The odd thing is, it seems to run right under the sea, unless my eyes deceive me.’

‘We’ll have to be careful,’ said Ian. ‘It looks sharp enough to cut through our shoes.’

‘Glass instead of sand. Intriguing, Chesterton.’ The Doctor tapped the young schoolteacher on the leg with his walking stick.

They were interrupted by a shout from Susan.

Barbara and Ian went to her leaving the Doctor on the beach. Susan had discovered a shallow pool and was busy removing her shoes and socks.

‘If I can’t swim at least I can paddle,’ she said.

Barbara smiled and sat down at the edge of the pool to watch. As she did so she inadvertently knocked one of Susan’s shoes into the water.

‘I’ll get it,’ said Susan and swung her legs over the edge. ‘No, Susan!’

Ian was staring down into the pool where Susan's shoe was dissolving in a steam of bubbles.

'What is it?' gasped Barbara.

'I don't know. Some sort of acid.'

'But it was so fast. It just seemed to disintegrate.'

'And I was going to paddle in it...' Susan shivered at the thought.

'It's alright,' said Barbara comforting her. 'You've got some other shoes in the ship, haven't you?' Susan nodded. 'Go and put them on. We'll wait for you.'

'You'd better wear my shoes to get there,' suggested Ian. 'They'll be much too big for me.'

'Better than cutting your feet open on this glass.'

Susan slipped into Ian's heavy brogues and clumped off towards the TARDIS.

Barbara glanced down at the pool again. 'Ian, this looks like a tidal pool.'

'I agree. It matches up with the glass beach.'

'Then all that out there,' Barbara gestured towards the sea, 'is acid too. A sea of acid!'

Ian nodded. It was an alarming thought.

Susan's progress over the rocks was slow. Her approach to the TARDIS was heralded by slipping and sliding noises and squeals of pain. Alerted by this the creature which was about to force open the TARDIS door slunk back to the cover of the rocks.

'Acid, eh? Astonishing.' The Doctor shook his head and stared at the sea. 'In all my travels I've never come across that before. Still, Susan wasn't harmed?'

'Losing her shoes was a bit frightening,' said Barbara. 'She went back to the ship for another pair.'

The Doctor glanced down at Ian's stockinged feet.

‘Pity *you* weren’t wearing shoes, young man. You could have lent her yours. You mustn’t get sloppy in your habits, you know.’

Ian was about to argue but the Doctor marched off down the beach. A few moments later he gave a cry and pointed to something ahead. Beyond a narrow spit of rock lay two bullet-shaped objects about eight feet long, wide enough to carry a man, and with stabilising fins at the rear. They were made of a hard, translucent material, like glass torpedoes.

‘Give me a hand to get this open.’ The Doctor knelt down beside one of the tubes and searched for an opening.

‘Can I help?’ asked Barbara.

‘See if there are any other signs of habitation. Be careful, Chesterton. I think it’s dry but there may still be acid adhering to the outside.’

‘There doesn’t seem to be any hinge. Maybe the ends unscrew.’

‘Quite likely,’ replied the Doctor, ‘try it. Whichever way it works it would have to be absolutely water-tight, or, rather, acid-tight.’

Barbara wandered off towards the rocks. The Doctor’s bossy tone meant he was getting excited.

Barbara would have been happy to leave there and then but she knew the Doctor would have to solve the mystery of the torpedoes first.

She decided to explore a spine of rock which ran into the sea fifty yards away. Almost immediately she glimpsed another of the transparent tubes nestling beneath an overhanging lip. It was identical to the others although the top had been prised open. As Barbara drew level she noticed a black, rubbery object dangling from the opening. With a shock she realised it was an arm.

Something was still inside!

Susan emerged from the TARDIS, clutching Ian’s shoes.

She had managed to dig out a spare pair of her own which would do, although they felt a bit tight. She had recovered from her fright and looked about expectantly for the others. Guessing they were further up the beach, she set off in that direction.

After a few yards her shoes began to pinch and she bent down to

adjust them. As she did so she noticed some peculiar footprints in the sand. They were the size of a human foot, but webbed between the toes. They led up to the TARDIS then away again into the rocks. Intrigued, Susan decided to follow the footprints. They led into the rocky hinterland.

Behind her, keeping carefully to the cover of the larger rocks, a strange figure set off in pursuit. Despite its clumsy, webbed feet the creature slithered soundlessly over the polished stones. It was roughly the size and shape of a man, but more agile and strong in its movements. Its skin was dark and rubbery, its bullet-shaped head smooth and devoid of features except for two frog-like eyes and a snoutish protuberance like corrugated piping. The head was flanked by two flat, pointed lugs. The face as a whole faintly resembled that of Anubis, the jackal-headed god of Egyptian mythology.

The creature, however, was far from being any sort of god. It was, in fact, a Class I Voord Assault Trooper, programmed to kill enemy life-forms on sight!

The Doctor stared down at the tube Barbara had found.

Ian was unscrewing the nosecone. The hull of the craft had been damaged and through the translucent shell they could make out a lifeless body within.

‘See the crack along the side,’ indicated the Doctor excitedly. ‘The acid must have seeped through.’

Barbara grimaced at the thought. Ian finally wrenched the nose clear and gingerly hoisted out the body. It felt incredibly light.

‘It’s like some sort of protective suit,’ he said, laying the outline carefully on the sand for inspection.

‘Whatever wore it was something similar to a human,’ observed the Doctor.

‘But how did it get out of the suit,’ pondered Ian. ‘It looks intact.’

Barbara knelt down and examined a leg. ‘I don’t think it did get out.’ She pointed to a tiny rip in the material. ‘The acid must have got inside.’

Ian shook his head. ‘Poor devil.’

‘I think we should return to the ship,’ declared the Doctor. ‘I’m concerned about Susan.’

The group rose and turned to leave. Ian, shielding his eyes from the sun, suddenly pointed inland. ‘Look, there’s some sort of building.’

The Doctor and Barbara squinted towards the horizon and sure enough they could just discern a huge pyramid-shaped edifice hovering like a mirage above the rocks.

‘Good!’ exclaimed the Doctor. ‘Now we might learn who uses these strange boats. Come along,’ he waved his stick cheerily, ‘back to the ship for Susan and then a little visiting, I think.’ He set off across the sand at a smart gallop.

Barbara looked reproachfully at Ian. Now they would never get the Doctor away.

Susan was regretting her foolhardiness. It was one thing to play guessing games near the TARDIS on the beach. It was another to trek solidly for half an hour across sweltering rocks and find you are lost. She had given up trying to follow the footprints and was now just eager to get back to the others. But further inland the rocky landscape grew tougher. Small gulleys became deep ravines. It was twenty minutes since Susan had caught sight of the sea. Suddenly she emerged onto a plateau.

Ahead was a massive wall. Built of gigantic marble blocks, the wall extended for at least a mile and soared skywards for hundreds of feet. All fear left her as Susan gazed in awe at the magnificent piece of architecture. In size and splendour it recalled the Pyramids of Egypt or the ancient cities of Babylon. The walls reflected the light in a peculiar way so that it glowed. Susan rushed over to touch the smooth surface. It was cool despite the fierceness of the sun. She decided to walk as far as one corner.

‘She’s not inside anywhere,’ Barbara announced.

‘Wretched child.’ The Doctor stomped angrily out of the TARDIS.

Then Barbara spotted Ian’s shoes. ‘I can see her foot-prints in the sand.’

The Doctor peered at the ground.

‘Sand here, but glass on the beach. I think the acid sea is a defence

barrier.'

'You mean all visitors are unwelcome,' said Barbara.

'It would seem so.' The Doctor fingered his lapel thoughtfully.

Ian slipped into his shoes. 'Come on. Let's find Susan. Maybe she went to have a look at that building?'

Susan stopped. Was that a slight movement ahead of her?

She decided it was a trick of the sun.

In fact she was mistaken. The Voord had tracked her to the City and was poised, dagger raised, a few feet away behind a corner. But before Susan reached the Voord's hiding place, something very odd occurred. A section of the wall behind the Voord slid open, operated by an unseen mechanism, and the creature fell backwards through the hole without a sound. As Susan rounded the corner the wall closed, and she passed by totally unsuspecting.

Panting from the steep climb, Ian, Barbara and the Doctor arrived at the plateau in front of the City. They gazed in amazement at the colossal structure.

'Look at the joins between the blocks,' said Barbara.

'It must have been built with tremendous accuracy.'

'The Egyptians did the same thing,' said Ian. 'And some of the Indians of Central and South America.

Absolute precision at certain weights is the key.'

'Before you two get carried away,' cut in the Doctor,

'I think we should try and find Susan. We'll make a circuit around this building and meet at the furthermost corner. Come along. Off you go.' He shooed them away with his stick.

Barbara and Ian set out along the base of the building. The Doctor briefly examined the wall, then marched off in the opposite direction.

Susan had lost interest in this vast, but featureless edifice.

She was now traversing the fourth side which exactly resembled the previous three. She guessed she must have covered a couple of miles

and there was nothing to see but endless marble.

She stopped for a moment to ease her aching limbs.

Although this side of the building was in the shade, the temperature remained unbearably high. She slipped off her right shoe and shook out a small glass chipping which had been digging into the sole of her foot.

Struggling to put the shoe back on, she leaned heavily against the wall. There was a slight click and, before she knew it, Susan had lost her balance and was toppling backwards. Her terrified scream was just audible before the wall slid back into place.

2

The Marble City

Ian glanced at Barbara. There was no mistaking the voice. 'Come on!' Ian sprinted towards the corner some two hundred yards away.

On the far side of the City the Doctor meandered amiably along the wall. He was enjoying the morning sunshine and paused a moment to admire the view. The rocky plateau immediately surrounding the City merged into a mountainous region inland. He could see several large peaks soaring into the thin, blue haze. The sides were spotted here and there with vegetation. The Doctor concluded that life of some description must exist on the island. His conjecture was suddenly and unexpectedly confirmed. For, as he relaxed against the cool marble, a section of wall behind him swung open and he disappeared through the gap like a rabbit in a conjuring trick.

Barbara stared at the blank wall. 'I could have sworn I heard her.'

'Where's the Doctor?' asked Ian. 'Even if he was travelling at half our speed be should have reached that far corner by now.'

Barbara glanced nervously around. He was right.

Where *was* the Doctor?

Susan rose shakily to her feet. She felt like the victim of a bad parlour trick. She had fallen about eight or ten feet but, except for one or two bruises, she was uninjured.

The wall above had locked shut and she was standing in a gloomy

passage about fifty yards long, with shallow alcoves at intervals along both sides. She set off along the passage.

She had not proceeded ten paces when someone appeared at the far end of the passage. The figure wore a monkish robe, his head concealed by the cowl. Susan edged back into the shadows. The figure disappeared.

Then in the silence Susan became aware of another noise—like the breathing of an animal. Her flesh crawled as she realised something was standing behind her! The next instant a clammy arm pinned her to the wall and she caught a glimpse of a hideous, rubbery head. She screamed and wriggled to get free. Then there was a sharp groan, the creature's grip slackened, and it slid to the floor, writhing. Gasping from fright, Susan steeled herself to look at it.

The creature lay face down, a small dagger protruding from its side. With horror, Susan realised she must have forced the creature onto its own blade in the violent struggle. It was humanoid, but with reptilian hands and feet. Its head was smooth and oval with bulbous eyes and flat ears.

It was several seconds before Susan noticed the hooded figure. He was advancing slowly towards her, blocking her exit from the alcove. She was trapped!

'The only thing we can do is make another circuit of the walls,' resolved Barbara.

'I've been all round it,' replied Ian. 'I can't see any sort of a door anywhere.' He disappeared for the umpteenth time.

'Of course, there's just a chance that Susan didn't come this way at all.' Barbara gazed wearily towards the shore. 'She might be waiting for us in the ship.'

There was no reply from Ian.

Barbara called out loud. 'I said we might go back to the ship.'

There was still no reply. Barbara scrambled to her feet and walked to the corner.

'Ian!'

The length of wall was completely deserted. Barbara bit her lip,

fighting the sudden well of panic. There must be an explanation. People didn't just vanish into thin air!

There was a gentle click in the wall behind her and the marble blocks slid magically apart. Barbara span round.

In the opening was a tall, robed figure. His arms groped towards her.

Ian scanned the dim passage into which he had been unceremoniously dumped. It ran underground for about fifty yards towards a wide junction. The walls were buttressed at regular intervals, creating pockets of shadow along the route. He glimpsed something on the floor in one of the alcoves. It was a body—he had found one of the creatures from the submarines! This time the cause of death was obvious. A small, pointed dagger jutted from the creature's side. Ian drew back from the body and glanced apprehensively up and down the passageway. If Susan was still sightseeing near here she had to be found quickly. He set off at a run to explore the remaining corridors.

'It was awful. The wall just seemed to swallow me up.

Then this creature grabbed me and the next thing he was dead.'

The speaker was Susan. She was addressing Barbara and the Doctor. The three of them were locked inside a dingy cell to which they had been led independently by the robed figure.

Barbara looked puzzled. 'Do you think the creatures live here?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No. The one in the long robe seems to belong to this building.'

'Then the creatures from those glass submarines are intruders like us.'

'With one difference,' the Doctor wagged his finger emphatically, 'they died, and we are only imprisoned.'

'Perhaps we're going to be killed too.'

'Well now, we mustn't worry too much,' said the Doctor cheerfully. 'That young friend of yours is a man of infinite resource. Whilst he is free our chance of rescue is quite good.'

'He isn't free,' said Barbara. 'They captured him before me.'

The Doctor's face fell.

The hooded figure strode purposefully along one of the many corridors in the Great City. He looked neither to left nor right, seemingly preoccupied with his own thoughts. For this reason he was caught totally unawares.

A clammy forearm suddenly gripped his neck and forced him to the floor.

At that moment Ian turned the corner. He saw the Voord, the robed figure and a flash of steel. Ian hurled himself at the Voord and the knife clattered to the floor.

Ian scrambled to his feet. The Voord, surprisingly nimble, was already up and advancing on him. With a quick feint Ian locked both arms round the creature's neck. The Voord tried to wrench itself free and they fell to the ground. As they rolled about the floor the robed figure ran to the wall where a carved lever was embedded in the stonework. The Voord lunged at Ian and slammed him against the wall, knocking the breath from his body.

Then, gripping Ian's neck between its webbed fingers it began to throttle him. With a last, desperate jerk, Ian wheeled the Voord round into an alcove. As the Voord hit the wall the robed figure pulled the lever and the creature tumbled backwards, pulling Ian with him. Ian chopped at the clammy arm with his bare fist until it released its grip on his neck. Screaming horribly, the Voord plunged into the blackness. There was an echoing splash as it hit a pool far below, then silence. Ian stared at the gaping hole. It closed to. He turned, panting for breath, and faced the robed figure.

The stranger spoke first. 'Why do you protect me?'

he asked. The voice was low and forbidding.

Ian swallowed, 'Are you a prisoner here?' It was all he could think of.

The stranger nodded and pulled down his hood. A sombre, regal face was revealed, straight-nosed, with clear, deep-set eyes surmounted by a long, sloping forehead and sparse grey hair.

'In a way, for I can never leave here. In another way, this is my home.'

Ian didn't find this very helpful. 'Where are my friends?' he asked.

'Safe,' intoned the stranger. 'I saw your machine materialise. Until I knew otherwise, I had to treat you as potential enemies. The Voord

were already trying to penetrate the walls.'

'The Voord?' repeated Ian, uncomprehending.

'The creature who attacked me was a Voord,'

explained the stranger. 'It is many years since their last assault. Now they have returned.' He sighed and his eyes grew cloudy. 'If they continue to come, eventually they must succeed.'

'I would've thought this place impregnable,' said Ian, looking round at the thick walls. 'How many of you defend it?'

'How many?' The stranger let out a hollow laugh. 'I am alone. But please...' he raised a polite hand, 'first we will release your companions. Then I will try to explain.'

Relieved to hear the others were safe, Ian followed the stranger.

As they moved off a shadowy form glided after them.

The stranger led Ian to the cell where there was a joyful reunion with the others. Then the old man, who introduced himself as Arbitan, took them to the upper levels of the City. There, in the Archive Room, he began to recount the history of his planet and people.

When Arbitan had finished, the Doctor said, 'So, your technology reached its peak over two thousand years ago?'

Arbitan nodded. 'Yes. All our knowledge culminated in the manufacture of this.' He gestured proudly towards a large machine which they had noticed on entering the room. It reached to the ceiling, an elegant, spherical structure made of transparent material with cross struts intersecting at six equidistant points on the circumference. The machine's power base was located in the centre and a network of connecting filaments ran all over the outer shell like a tracery of nerves. The entire machihe glowed with a pure white light.

'At the time,' continued Arbitan, 'it was popularly called the Conscience of Marinus. Marinus is the name of our planet. At first the machine was simply a judge and jury that was never wrong or unfair. We added to the machine, improved it. It became more and more sophisticated. It was possible to radiate its power and influence to the minds of men throughout the planet.

They no longer had to decide what was right or wrong.

The machine decided for them.'

'Then surely it was possible to eliminate evil from the thoughts of men,' asked the Doctor.

'That is exactly what happened. Our planet was unique in the Universe. Violence, robbery, war, hate, fear... these things were unknown on Marinus.'

Arbitan looked proudly at his listeners. 'For seven centuries we prospered. Then a Voord named Yartek invented an immuniser. He made many of these immunisers for his followers. They were able to rob and cheat, kill and exploit. Our people were unable to resist because the machine made violence alien to them.' He paused. Anger showed in his eyes. Outside the Archive Room the creature which had followed them was startled by the sudden silence and slipped away.

'But surely by that time your machine was a great source of danger,' said Ian. 'If it fell into the wrong hands they could control the whole of Marinus. Why didn't you destroy it?'

'We always hoped that we would overcome Yartek's immuniser,' replied Arbitan. 'So instead of destroying it we removed the five micro-circuits.' He pointed to the junction points on the circumference of the machine. 'I kept one of them.' He removed a clear, plastic plate about two inches square from the remaining socket. 'The others were taken to places of safety all over Marinus.'

Arbitan's eyes burned brightly. 'Now the time has come when they must be recovered!'

'Why can't you simply make new keys?' enquired Barbara, sweetly.

'The keys themselves are simple. The micro-circuit inside each one is extremely complicated.' He held the key aloft for them to see. Laminated into the plastic was an intricate pattern barely visible to the naked eye.

'A permutation of numbers and signals which would take a thousand years to unravel. I have done all I can by modifying the machine.'

The Doctor nodded. 'And given all the keys in their proper places your machine would be irresistible?'

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t there anyone you can send for the keys?’ asked Ian. An anguished expression appeared in the old man’s face. ‘Over the years all my friends and followers have gone but never returned.’ His voice grew tremulous.

‘Last year I sent my daughter. She has not returned and all I have had to comfort me has been the distant echo of her voice and the imagined fall of her footstep.’ His expression filled with a look of infinite sadness.

There was an embarrassed silence, then Arbitan turned to them.

‘But now your coming has brought new hope! *You* must find the circuits for me!’ he said, exultantly.

The visitors looked at each other in dismay.

The TARDIS rested on the beach like an abandoned toy.

The fierce sun beat down on the peeling blue paint-work, highlighting its tatty, battered appearance. Any thing less like a sophisticated Space-Time machine would be difficult to find. But looks deceive. The TARDIS, and its master may have seemed decrepit and unreliable on the surface but both harboured powers which had eluded countless civilisations since the dawn of Time itself.

Barbara and Ian rounded the spit of rock and the TARDIS came into view. They paused for the Doctor and Susan who were some way behind.

After a moment Barbara spoke. ‘I don’t know about you, Ian, but I hated leaving that old man. We must have been his last hope.’

Ian looked across at her. ‘Yes, I wish there was something we could do.’

There was a flurry of pebbles and Susan bounced into view.

‘Sorry we’ve been so long. The climb was a bit steep for the Doctor.’ She turned and called impatiently.

‘Hurry up Grandfather!’

‘I’m coming, I’m coming. I don’t know what all the rush is for.’ The Doctor scrambled into view. ‘Well, don’t just stand there.’ He glared at

them and stomped off towards the TARDIS, hot and irate.

Five yards from the TARDIS the Doctor stopped in his tracks.

'What the...!' He reeled backwards in surprise.

A moment later Ian did the same thing.

'What is it?' cried Barbara. She ran up and felt the air in front of them. 'It's an invisible wall,' she said, amazed.

'Yes, but there's no substance here,' added the Doctor.

Susan felt her way along it. She reached the far side of the TARDIS. 'It's all the way round. There doesn't seem to be a corner.'

'There wouldn't be,' explained the Doctor.

'Molecules would be at their weakest.' He turned to Ian excitedly. 'Look here, Chesterton, this is fascinating. I believe a force barrier has been thrown up around the ship.' At that moment a voice rang out from the air above their heads.

'I am sorry you have forced me into keeping you from your ship. But your refusal to help me left me no alternative!'

It was Arbitan. The four travellers stared at one another blankly. The voice seemed to be coming from all around them.

'Arbitan! Where are you?' shouted Ian.

'That is not important. If you help me find the keys of Marinus I will let you have free access to your machine... when you have delivered all the keys to me. If not, you will stay on the island without food or water.

The choice is yours.'

'Choice? What choice?' demanded Ian angrily.

There was no reply.

They regarded one another in stunned silence. A matter of yards away, but impregnable, stood the TARDIS, their only means of escape. They were marooned on Marinus.

The Doctor paced the Archive Room, simmering with anger. Susan's

attempts to pacify him had met with little response. Ian and Barbara were poring over various maps and charts. Finally, Ian turned aside from the papers.

‘Now we know roughly the locations of the keys. All we have to do is get them.’ He gave Barbara a wry grin.

‘As soon as you begin your journey,’ explained Arbitan, ‘I shall remove the force field. Your ship will be available to you on your return.’

‘If we return,’ said Barbara pointedly.

The Doctor could contain himself no longer. ‘I know we have no choice but this whole affair is outrageous! Blackmail! Pure and simple blackmail!’

Ian sighed. ‘Doctor we’ve been through all that.

Now let’s just get on with it.’

Arbitan turned to Barbara and said in gentle tones,

‘Perhaps you will bring me some news of my daughter. I miss her.’

‘And another thing,’ the Doctor burst out again, ‘if you think I’m going to cross that wretched acid sea in one of those primitive submersibles you are quite mistaken.’

‘I have no intention of asking you to travel in any such absurd way,’ replied Arbitan, unruffled.

‘Oh?’ The Doctor tried to hide his surprise.

‘I shall give you a device that will enable you to move from place to place.’

‘Oh! Really?’ A faint interest showed in the Doctor’s face. ‘Its principle is much the same as your ship, from what you have told me. Except that this can only cross the barriers of space, not time.’ Arbitan took two wrist-straps from a shelf and handed one to the Doctor.

The Doctor examined it carefully. It bore a small square dial like a watch face.

‘It separates molecular structures and reassembles them at one’s destination,’ explained Arbitan.

‘In the same order, I hope,’ joked Ian.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Chesterton,’ snapped the Doctor, intrigued by the device. ‘This is a perfectly acceptable method of travelling. Very compact too, sir, if I may say so. Very neat.’

Arbitan smiled politely and handed them each a strap. After they had donned them, he said, ‘Each strap is programmed to the same destination. You need only twist the dial once.’

‘Like this?’ said Barbara and she turned the device on her wrist.

There was a shimmering effect and she vanished.

‘Barbara!’ cried Susan.

Ian turned angrily on Arbitan. ‘What have you done to her?’

‘Don’t waste time. You must follow her quickly. One final thing,’ the old man’s face grew solemn, ‘if, when you return here, you find the Voord have taken the building, you must not let them get the keys. You under-stand that? Destroy them.’ He delivered these last words with great emphasis. ‘Now! Twist the dials!’

Ian, Susan, and the Doctor did as they were bid.

The room shimmered and they were gone.

Arbitan stared at the empty space. ‘For the future of all our people,’ he prayed fervently, ‘I hope you succeed.’

Gathering up his robe he crossed to the machine and began to check it.

He had been engrossed in this task for several minutes when a shadow fell across the open doorway.

Arbitan’s back presented a defenceless target. The Voord slithered noiselessly across the polished floor. Too late, Arbitan sensed the creature’s presence behind him. As he turned the Voord’s blade rammed deep into his chest.

With a pitiful cry the last Keeper of the Keys slumped to the floor, dead.

The Doctor, Ian and Susan rematerialised together.

‘Mmm, quite exhilarating,’ remarked the Doctor.

‘Where’s Barbara?’ Susan demanded.

They were standing before an impressive portico fronted by a flight of carved steps.

Ian gave a cry. ‘Look!’

On the top step lay Barbara’s wrist-strap. Ian retrieved it and a look of dismay crossed his face. He turned to the others. ‘There’s blood on it,’ he whispered.

3

The Velvet Web

The Doctor took the wrist-strap from Ian and stared at the drops of blood. ‘I can’t imagine why Barbara would leave of her own free will.’ He looked towards the steps.

‘Whatever lives behind those doors must have taken her by force.’

‘Then let’s get it,’ urged Ian. He bounded up the steps and shouldered the heavy doors apart.

Utter darkness awaited them on the inside. The travellers peered warily into the gloom for several seconds. Suddenly, they were engulfed in a flood of light, which stabbed their eyes like steel darts. The light was accompanied by an earsplitting noise. The Doctor and his companions writhed with pain until, just as suddenly, the light faded and the noise ceased. They opened their eyes.

Before them they now perceived a huge chamber, like a state-room or banqueting hall. Fluted marble columns supported an elaborate ceiling, painted in rich blues and purples. Silken drapes of deep vermilion hung against the walls, and the marble floor was patterned with intricate mosaics. A fountain played in the centre.

Around it were arranged several couches. Draped over one of these, entirely at her ease and attended by two diaphanously clad beauties, was Barbara.

‘Susan! Ian!’ She beckoned them over.

Susan ran across and hugged her.

‘Barbara, we found your wrist-strap with blood on it.’ ‘I know. That was silly. I turned the dial and seemed to be falling through space. I got frightened and tried to tear it off my wrist. Scratched myself, see.’ She showed Susan the mark.

Ian grinned at her. ‘Well, I must say, it’s quite a nice little place you’ve got here!’

Barbara winked. ‘You haven’t seen anything yet.’

She turned to the beautiful attendants. ‘Will you bring some food for my friends?’ The two girls curtseyed and withdrew. The Doctor raised an eyebrow as they brushed past him.

‘You may be seated,’ said Barbara with a smile, indicating the empty sofas.

Ian bowed low. ‘Your Royal Highness is most gracious. Perhaps if your Majesty would stop hogging the grapes we could all have some!’

Barbara laughed and handed round a large bowl of fruit. Ian turn turned to the Doctor. ‘What do you think of it, Doctor?’

The Doctor frowned disapprovingly. ‘Sensuous and decadent...’ a ghost of a smile appeared, ‘but rather pleasant. I say, is that a pomegranate?’ He leaned forward and extracted a large, green fruit from the bowl.

Susan noticed several bolts of silk lying on the floor.

‘I’d love a dress made from one of these,’ she cried,

‘they’re gorgeous.’

‘That’s what they’re here for,’ explained Barbara.

‘They asked me to choose the materials I wanted for my robes.’ A gong sounded and six silver platters full of gastronomic delights were brought in and set down before them.

‘All most remarkable,’ said the Doctor, shaking his head in amazement.

‘Well, I’m starving,’ announced Susan. She began tucking into the large spread.

The others quickly followed suit.

‘Mmm. I do believe these are truffles!’ said the Doctor approvingly.

They ate hungrily for several minutes until Susan whispered, ‘We’ve got a visitor.’

Approaching them across the room was a tall young man in a silken tunic. His features were finely chiselled, straight nose, high forehead, framed by long blond hair.

‘This is where we pay the bill,’ said Ian quietly.

The young man reached the group. ‘No, don’t get up,’ he said as they rose to greet him. His voice was soft and cultured. ‘I apologise for intruding. I wondered if there was anything you desired?’

A moment of embarrassment followed, then Barbara spoke.

‘Could you tell us about this place? Whom do we have to thank for all this?’

‘You are in the city of Morphoton,’ replied the young man, smiling. ‘Our people are perhaps the most contented in the Universe. Nothing they desire is denied them.’

Susan’s face brightened. ‘I’d love a dress made from that silk.’

‘Susan, I will not have you taking advantage...’

snapped the Doctor.

The young man silenced him with a wave of the hand. ‘She takes no advantage, truly. Our one wish is to fulfil your every need. She shall have the dress.’ His mild gaze traversed the group, gently questioning them in turn. ‘And you?’ he said, addressing the Doctor. ‘Have you no wish? No great desire?’

The Doctor coughed. ‘Yes, well... perhaps... but I’m afraid it’s not quite as easy as giving Susan a dress.’ He inspected his fingernails self-consciously.

‘What is it then, Grandfather?’

The Doctor eyed the young man shrewdly.

‘Well, perhaps if I had to choose... a well-equipped laboratory with every conceivable instrument. Hmm?’

‘It will be arranged.’

Ian’s jaw dropped in amazement.

‘It will? You mean he can have it?’

The young man smiled knowingly. ‘Perhaps in the morning when you see the laboratory, you will find our way of life easier to understand. Now, as it is late, I suggest you sleep. When you wake you will learn everything about Morphoton.’

He gave them a low bow and left the room.

The Doctor turned to the others. ‘Charming young man, charming. I think a study of this culture is going to prove very fascinating.’ He stifled a yawn. ‘Do you know, I’m suddenly tired.’ He slumped onto a sofa and closed his eyes.

Barbara noticed Susan nodding off too. She arranged a few cushions around the young girl and returned to her couch. Ian was staring vacantly into space.

‘You don’t look very happy,’ she said.

‘Perhaps it’s my materialistic side. How rich and powerful do you have to be to give things away free?’

‘Now don’t spoil it all,’ said Barbara, plumping a cushion. ‘You can’t apply Earth’s standards here.’

‘No, it’s certainly very different.’ Ian looked round, then lowered his voice. ‘Did you see that man’s eyes?’

‘What about them?’

‘He didn’t blink once. Am I being ridiculous?’

‘Yes,’ replied Barbara sleepily. ‘They’re just kind, hospitable people. Try to get some sleep. You’ll feel differently in the morning.’

Ian lay on a couch and tried to banish his feeling of scepticism. It was all too pleasant, too neat, too... friendly.

Not like the Doctor to be taken in either. Mind you, the old boy had a few weak spots. He could just imagine him like a child with a new toy if he got that laboratory... Ian’s thoughts tailed off and he slipped into a deep sleep.

The travellers dozed and for some time only the gentle splashing of the fountain broke the silence in the room. Then, quietly at first, another noise could be heard, like the hard breathing of a wild animal. It came from behind a carved plaque on one of the walls. After a moment the plaque slide aside and in the darkness beyond I could be seen two eyes, about six inches in diameter. The eyes slowly scanned the room, taking in the sleeping forms. Then the plaque slid back into place.

The lights in the room grew dim and after a few moments a second, larger panel opened in the wall. One of the girl attendants glided out. Her expression was glazed. Trance-like she approached the Doctor, and placed a small metal disc on his forehead. She did the same to the others then retreated through the open panel which shut noiselessly behind her.

The Doctor, Ian and Susan slept on undisturbed, but Barbara, who was dozing fitfully, suddenly awoke.

She felt something cold on her forehead. She sat up and removed the small metal disc.

She was just wondering how it got there when a blaze of light irradiated the room, bleaching the picture before her eyes to a fiat, dazzling negative. The light seemed to be inside her head, scouring her brain like a powerful searchlight. It was accompanied by a loud, sonorous beat which echoed round the marbled walls.

Barbara reached out to wake Susan, but the effort was too great. She felt drained of all energy. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound emerged. With a shudder she fell back onto the couch and lost consciousness.

Morning came to find the Doctor, Ian and Susan breakfasting together. They appeared bright and cheerful after their night's rest. Barbara lay asleep on her couch, dead to the world.

As he ate, Ian eyed one of the attendants admiringly. She was tall and blonde and returned his greeting with a friendly smile. He noticed, however, that her eyes were curiously devoid of expression, like those of the young man the night before.

'Most refreshing,' said the Doctor, downing a large fruit juice.

Ian casually rubbed his forehead. It was unaccountably itching this morning.

The Doctor noticed.

‘What’s the matter?’ enquired the Doctor.

‘I don’t know. A sort of mild irritation.’

‘I have rather a sore spot there myself.’

A delighted shriek from Susan interrupted them.

One of the girl attendants was handing her a beautiful silk dress.

‘Look, Grandfather. Isn’t it beautiful? I’m going to wake Barbara and show her.’ She crossed to Barbara’s couch and shook her gently.

Barbara stirred, then sat up and stared incredulously at the others.

‘What’s happened?’ she cried, and gestured crazily at the room.

The Doctor moved swiftly to her side. ‘She’s not properly awake. Susan, hand me that fruit juice.’ He offered it to Barbara. ‘Here, drink this.’

Barbara looked at it in revulsion and dashed it from the Doctor’s hand. ‘It’s filthy!’ The glass shattered into fragments on the marble floor.

‘What’s got into you?’ demanded Ian.

Barbara looked at them in disbelief. ‘Can’t you see?

And the room, they’ve changed it!’

‘It’s the same,’ said Susan.

‘No it isn’t, it isn’t.’ Barbara began to sob. ‘This terrible dress!’ She ran her fingers down her clothes.

‘And the furniture!’ She shrank from the couch where she had been sleeping.

The Doctor looked across at Ian. ‘What’s happened to her?’ he asked quietly.

‘WHY CAN’T YOU SEE IT?’ Barbara was now screaming and shaking.

Ian grabbed her by the shoulders and slapped her hard across the face. ‘Get a hold of yourself!’

Barbara gasped at the blow, then looked imploringly into Ian's face.

'Ian, try to see... please. Try to see the truth.'

Ian stared at her in bewilderment. The Doctor looked equally baffled.

Susan gently squeezed Barbara's hand. 'Don't be afraid. Look, they brought me my dress.' She showed Barbara the silken gown.

Barbara recoiled from the garment as if it were a snake. 'Dirty, dirty rags!' she cried. 'I don't know what they've done to you or why it hasn't worked on me, but I *must* find a way to show you. I *must*... before it's too late.'

She gazed forlornly at her companions. It was as if a million light years separated them.

'Here comes Altos,' announced the Doctor. 'Perhaps he can convince you.'

Their host was approaching.

'He knows it's failed me,' whispered Barbara.

A moment's anger showed in the young man's face, then he advanced smiling and full of concern.

'What's the matter, aren't you feeling well? Let me take you to our physicians.'

'No, no.' Barbara backed away from him.

'Please, I only want to help you.' He took hold of her arm.

'No!' Barbara broke away and ran across the room.

'Barbara!' yelled Ian, but she had already reached the door and disappeared.

'Please don't concern yourself,' said Altos. 'She is overwrought. I will deal with it. You stay here.'

He strode quickly out of the room, leaving the others stunned and perplexed.

Barbara raced along acres of marbled floor. She needed somewhere to hide. Altos would pursue her and she was desperate for time to collect

her thoughts. She flew past rows of locked doors, before spotting one slightly ajar. She peered inside. A flight of steps led down to a bare floor. She slipped in and closed the door. The room was empty apart from a wooden table, a couple of chairs and a straw mattress.

Immediately, footsteps echoed along the corridor outside. Barbara crammed herself behind a piece of jutting wall at the side of the steps. Seconds later the door was thrown open and someone surveyed the room from the doorway above. After a long pause, the door clanged shut. Barbara slumped to the floor, her nerves all but shattered. The previous ten minutes had been the worst in her life. She half wondered if she had not woken at all and it was all a nightmare. She had read once that mad-men thought they were the only sane people in the world. But she was not mad. *She* was in her right mind, and somehow the minds of her companions had been tampered with. How else could they not have seen what she saw. The splendours of that room were trickery, a deceitful mirage. She had seen the reality: dank, dripping walls, furniture made of rough boards, inedible scraps for food, and Susan's dress a bundle of rags.

Everywhere was not richness and beauty, but filth and squalor. Like this cell she now sat in.

Barbara rose unsteadily to her feet. She must lift the spell from the minds of her friends. There had to be some kind of controlling force which operated through the discs, maybe in the building itself. She would have to find it.

She mounted the steps and cautiously tried the door. It was stuck. She gave it a good pull but to no avail.

It had been locked from the outside.

The young man, Altos, arrived at a heavy, studded door and knocked. After a polite pause he entered. The room, in semi-darkness, was large and resembled a medical laboratory.

Altos stood to attention. 'One of the women has resisted the power of the Mesmeron,' he reported. 'She has escaped into the City.'

He addressed himself to four glass domes, similar to Victorian display cases, which dominated the room.

Housed within each was a full-sized, pulsating brain. The four brains, fed by a mass of rubber tubing connected to nearby liquid containers, rose slowly up and down in their cases, giving out the same low

animal sound Barbara had heard the previous night. From the tops of the brains sprouted two stalks supporting a pair of giant, luminous eyes. A soft light glowed at the base of each dome, dramatically illuminating the throbbing lump of matter within. These creatures were the rulers of Morphoton.

A voice, no more than a breathless croak, emanated from one of the brains.

‘Who placed the discs?’

‘The girl Sabetha.’

‘She has failed us and must be punished. Return now to the other three. Reassure them about their friend... take them to their laboratory. In four hours we will give them the final exposure to the Mesmeron.’ The Voice wheezed and cackled. ‘They will be completely...

subjugated.’

Altos bowed. ‘And what of the one that has escaped?’

‘She has seen the truth and is beyond our control.

Find her and destroy her!’

4

The Brains of Morphoton

Barbara had fallen into a light sleep but was awakened by the sound of approaching footsteps. She scrambled to her feet and hid against the wall. The door was un-locked and someone was shoved roughly down the steps into the cell. Barbara gasped with surprise as she saw who it was.

‘You’re the girl who put the discs on our foreheads!’

The girl turned to Barbara and stared. ‘I made a mistake. I am to be punished.’ She spoke in dull, robotic tones which contrasted oddly with her soft, blonde features.

‘Tell me about this place,’ said Barbara.

‘I am to be punished,’ replied the girl mechanically.

Barbara took her by the shoulders. ‘Listen, I believe you are under some form of deep hypnosis.’

‘I am to be punished,’ replied the girl again.

Barbara released her hold, exasperated. Everyone she met in this place seemed incapable of carrying on a normal conversation. She decided to leave the girl for a while and try again later.

Altos was explaining to the Doctor and Ian about Barbara. They had nothing to worry about. The physicians had diagnosed a highly nervous condition.

She was now under deep sedation but would soon recover. Ian and the Doctor accepted this news without question, unaware of the brainwashing they had undergone.

‘Perhaps we can visit her later,’ ventured Ian.

‘Yes. Of course,’ came the smooth reply.

‘Well, naturally we’re all glad she’s going to be alright,’ said the Doctor brightly, ‘so if there’s nothing more we can do for her I suggest we... er... get a look at the laboratory, mmm?’ He flashed an inquisitive smile at Altos. The young man bowed graciously and led them off. A few moments later they were ushered into a tiny room, bare but for a single, rough table on which lay a few cups and plates. The Doctor paused admiringly in the doorway, as if he was entering Aladdin’s Cave.

‘Mmm. I think I shall find considerable scope here.’

Ian crossed to a rough hewn wooden stool. ‘Doctor, isn’t that a cyclotron?’

‘Yes, yes. A simple toy. I’m sure it will amuse you.’

He gave a dismissive wave of-the hand. ‘Ah, now this might be helpful. Yes, if I can have instruments like *these*,’

he picked up a tin mug with great reverence, ‘I might be able to overcome the fault in the time mechanism aboard the ship.’

Ian surveyed the room once more. ‘So they really can do it. They can give you anything you ask for!’

Altos allowed himself a tiny smile.

Barbara studied the girl across the cell. She was indeed lovely. She had thick blonde hair, flawless skin and a tall, aristocratic bearing. Only the eyes, large and expressionless, seemed out of keeping. Barbara had managed to extricate one word from this sphinx-like beauty. Her name was Sabetha.

Barbara eyed the girl despondently. She was stroking something which hung from a chain around her neck, like an amulet. Barbara shifted her position to see what it was. She recognised with a shock one of the micro-keys shown to them by Arbitan.

Barbara took hold of the key.

'Where did you get this?'

'It's mine.' The girl held it fiercely to her breast.

'I don't want to take it away from you,' explained Barbara gently. 'I just want to know where you got it.'

Sabetha eyed her suspiciously. 'They gave it to me...

my masters... it was the thing I desired most... it's mine...'

'But why? Why did you want it?'

'It's mine.' The girl turned away defensively.

Barbara sensed an opening. 'Does the name Arbitan mean anything to you?'

'Arbitan,' repeated the girl dully.

'Yes. Please try to remember.'

Recognition flickered in the beautiful face. 'Arbitan.

He sent me here. I was... I... I can't remember.'

'Is Arbitan your father?' Barbara grasped the girl by the shoulders and willed her to concentrate. There was no response. The recollection, ignited by a faint spark of memory, had disappeared.

Night had fallen. The Doctor, Susan and Ian had retired, and were asleep in the fountain room.

The Control Room, illuminated by the vapid glow from beneath the

four Brains, was quiet. A girl attendant stood silently awaiting orders, in a deep trance.

Finally one of the Morphos spoke. ‘Open the panel.’

The girl pressed a button and the panel slid back to reveal the room beyond. As the Morphos watched, Altos entered and began placing Somnor discs on the foreheads of the sleeping travellers.

The Brains started to pulsate. ‘Already I sense their will weakening,’ croaked the Voice. ‘Memory is fading.

When they wake all resistance will have ended. They will remember her no more.’

Altos re-entered the Control Room and stood to attention. ‘What are your orders for them when they have recovered?’

‘The two men will join the working parties. We can use the younger one’s strength with the haulage gangs.

The old man is weaker but intelligent. Isolate him and put him to work on the scheme for increasing manpower.

As for the child, she must be trained rapidly. She will take the place of Sabetha, the one that failed us.’

Altos nodded. ‘And what of the one that has escaped?’

The tremulous Voice paused, awaiting a surge of power from the bloated, throbbing brains. Then it spoke.

‘That is your responsibility. As soon as it is light a thorough search must be made. If you fail, then you will be killed. She must be found.’

Altos bowed low and withdrew.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor brought Barbara to her senses. The footsteps stopped at the door to the cell. Barbara dived for her hiding place. The door opened and Altos entered.

He descended the steps and crossed to the wooden bench where Sabetha was now slumped asleep. ‘You are to come with me.’

The girl made no movement. Grasping her under the arms, Altos dragged her to the steps.

Seeing her opportunity, Barbara crept to the staircase ahead of him. As she reached the top she slipped and Altos span round. He released Sabetha and drew a knife. Spreadeagled on the steps Barbara could only parry the blow. The blade waved wildly in the air for a second then forced itself slowly against her throat. As the cold metal dug into her skin there was a sudden crash and Altos toppled unconscious to the floor. Looking up, Barbara saw Sabetha standing over him, clutching one of the heavy, wooden chairs.

Barbara clasped the girl in her arms but Sabetha remained unaffected, still in a state of trance.

Barbara glanced towards the open door of the cellar.

'Sabetha... I must find the others and try to convince them... If I succeed, I'll come back for you.'

She gave the girl a final hug and ran up the steps.

Sabetha tottered unsteadily to the bench and slumped into unconsciousness.

Barbara moved cautiously along the narrow passage. She had covered several hundred yards when she spotted a door ahead. As she drew nearer, someone stepped out. It was Ian. Overjoyed, Barbara ran to greet him.

'Thank heaven I've found you, Ian. I thought they must have got to you...' She suddenly became aware of Ian's lack of response. 'I thought... Ian?...'

She scrutinised his face. The pupils of his eyes were dilated and gazed fixedy ahead. 'You must be the one who escaped,' he said in a strange voice. 'The one they told me about.' He gripped her fiercely by the arms.

'Ian!'

He stared at her unblinking and without recognition. 'I must take you to them...' Unmoved and unremembering, he dragged her through the open door.

Barbara recoiled in horror at the sight of the four brains glowing eerily inside their transparent domes. There was a deathly pause, then the Voice of the Morphos spoke.

‘So! She has been caught. You have done well and proved yourself worthy.’

Ian made a slight bow.

Barbara stared at him in revulsion. ‘It’s disgusting,’

she cried. ‘Ian, can’t you see how you are being used?’

Ian merely tightened his grip. Barbara looked around. There was no-one else in the room apart from a girl attendant who stood motionless and glassy-eyed.

Those monstrous brains had everyone in their thrall.

‘We are the masters of this city,’ rasped the Voice, echoing Barbara’s thoughts.

‘So you use your people to act as machines for you.’

‘Much more than machines,’ the disembodied Voice answered proudly. ‘The human body is the most flexible instrument in the world. No single mechanical device could reproduce its mobility and dexterity.’

‘So I’m to become one of your slaves.’

‘No, you have seen the truth of our city. It is beyond our power to erase this from your memory. You must be destroyed.’ The hoarse tones rose in pitch. ‘Kill her!’

Without expression Ian placed his hands around Barbara’s throat. She felt his grip tighten. She clawed wildly at his face, but his fingers squeezed her throat relentlessly, forcing the blood to her temples. With a desperate effort Barbara raised her arms above her head and brought her fists crashing down onto Ian’s wrists.

For a second his hold was weakened and she shook herself free.

Her momentum carried her headlong into the table which housed the intricate life-support equipment. On the table lay a heavy, metal jug which Barbara grabbed and held out ready to defend herself.

‘Kill her!’ screamed the Voice. ‘Kill her, kill her, kill her.’

Ian advanced towards her, his eyes like marbles.

With a cry Barbara brought the heavy jug down onto the life support

equipment. There was a strangulated gasp from the Voice. Running to the glass domes, she began smashing them with the jug. The room was filled with inhuman screams as she pulverised the cases in a frenzy of destruction. The carnage stopped Ian in his tracks. He looked dazed and bewildered. When all four domes had been reduced to fragments Barbara sank to her knees, sobbing.

Limp and exposed, the Brains twitched like wounded animals on the floor of the Control Room. After a minute they gave a final, shuddering gasp and lay still.

Ian and the girl immediately put their hands to their heads as if waking from a deep sleep.

'Barbara... Barbara... I... I...'

'It's alright, Ian.' Barbara rose and took him by the shoulders. 'It's alright now.'

The Doctor waited alone in the main chamber, anxiously tapping his stick on the marbled floor. Outside, the corridors echoed to the sounds of destruction as the liberated citizens of Morphoton ran riot through the capital.

Ian and Barbara entered, looking dishevelled.

'They're burning the city,' said Ian.

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'Taking their revenge, poor creatures.'

We should get out of here as soon as possible,' said Barbara. 'Where's Susan?'

'Oh, we're meeting here.' The Doctor waved his stick airily. 'She's bringing Sabetha and that young man Altos. I've questioned him and there's no doubt about it, he's one of Arbitan's couriers. He dug into one of his pockets. 'By the way I found these travel dials. Those repellent brain things didn't appreciate their significance.' He showed them two wrist-straps identical to their own.

'Ah, here are the others.' He turned to greet Susan.

She was followed by Altos and Sabetha, both looking quite natural and animated for the first time.

‘We have one key, but there are three more to find,’

announced the Doctor.

‘Yes, Sabetha wants to continue the search with us,’

said Susan.

‘I wish to join too,’ added Altos.

The Doctor nodded.

‘I was sent by Arbitan,’ continued the young man, ‘I and a friend called Eprin. He was to go ahead in search of key four and I came here for the first.’

‘Arbitan had not heard from either of you,’ said the Doctor. ‘We must presume something has happened to your friend Eprin.’

‘It may just be that he couldn’t reach the key,’

explained Altos. ‘It lies somewhere in the city of Millenius.’

‘Ah, yes, the place you mentioned,’ said the Doctor, his face brightening, ‘the highly civilised society.’ He turned on the others sharply. ‘I’ve decided to adopt his plan.’ ‘You mean go two jumps ahead and find the fourth key?’ said Ian.

‘Precisely. I shall find out what happened to Eprin,’

the Doctor nodded at Altos, ‘and if he’s alive, make contact with him. Then we can all meet again.’

Susan threw her arms around the Doctor. ‘I want to go with you.’

The old man gently disengaged himself. ‘Yes, yes, Susan. But it’s better to split our forces. You will travel with the main party, my child.’ He nodded towards Ian and Barbara.

‘I was just wondering if we should fix a time to meet?’ suggested Barbara.

After a brief consultation they agreed on seven days hence. The Doctor distributed the wrist-straps and there was a general leavetaking. The Doctor watched as first Susan, then the others dematerialised. Finally the Doctor adjusted his own dial to a later setting, gave it a firm twist and vanished.

Susan reappeared by a crumbling wall. For a moment she thought the dial had failed to work properly and she had landed outside Morphoton. But the dense weeds growing between the cracks in the wall told her this was a different place—deserted, dead, silent.

She looked around her. Strewn across the ground were lumps of carved masonry, once part of the wall.

Underfoot the vegetation was thicker than grass and wilder, like the beginnings of a jungle. An archway set in the wall was no longer passable. Creepers as thick as a man's wrist blocked the entrance, the giant leaves and tendrils spread out from the stonework to a depth of several feet. Twenty yards either side of the archway the wall disappeared into a mass of trees and foliage. Behind her the clearing stretched a mere ten or twelve paces.

Susan stood silently, taking all this in. It was so quiet she could hear her heart thumping. A faint singing began in her ears and the forest rustled and stirred around her.

She thought she heard talking and whispering, first coming from behind the creepers on the wall, then off to her left, or was it her right? Her senses were playing tricks in the silence. But no, there was a noise. It grew louder and louder, wrapping around her like a howling wind, piercing her eardrums.

'Stop it! Stop it!' she heard herself cry, her voice distant and muffled. The loud, harsh screeching pervaded her entire being.

'Go away! Go away!'

She ran in circles, delirious with pain, but still the noise continued, until the volume became unbearable.

Finally her resistance gave way and she fell unconscious to the ground.

5

The Screaming Jungle

Barbara materialised a few feet from the vine-covered wall. Nearby Susan was scrambling groggily to her feet, clutching her ears.

'Go back, go back!' Susan cried.

‘What is it?’

‘Don’t stay here!’

Barbara halted, unsure what to do. At that moment Ian, Sabetha and Altos materialised. Ian looked around and caught sight of Susan.

‘What’s happened?’ he asked.

Susan uncovered her ears. ‘It’s stopped,’ she said.

‘What has?’ demanded Barbara.

‘Didn’t you hear it?’ Susan looked incredulously at the others.

There was an embarrassed pause. Barbara placed an arm around Susan’s shoulders. ‘There could be animals in this jungle.’

‘It wasn’t anything like that,’ snapped Susan angrily.

‘Take it easy,’ said Ian. ‘Just tell us what happened.’

‘It was... I don’t know... It was... horrifying...’

‘Well, whatever it was has gone now,’ said Barbara brightly.

Susan gave her a steady look. ‘I did hear it you know.’

Barbara nodded. ‘Yes.’

There was another silence. Then Sabetha remarked,

‘This is a dead place.’

‘It is a bit quiet, isn’t it?’ replied Ian, trying to sound jolly.

‘That’s not what I meant.’

Ian knew exactly what she meant. There *was* something deathly in the atmosphere, a feeling of decay, an absence of human life.

‘The key will be on the other side of that wall,’ said Altos, reminding them of their mission.

They looked at the dense creepers guarding the entrance.

Sabetha said, ‘I suppose we could cut them down.’

‘It would take us the best part of a day,’ replied Ian.

‘Let’s make a short tour of the wall first.’

They split up. Ian, Altos and Sabetha went to look for another entrance while Barbara and Susan stayed put. ‘Don’t do anything until we get back,’ warned Ian as he left.

‘I do wish he wouldn’t treat me like Dresden china,’

complained Barbara.

‘It’s rather nice the way he looks after us all the time,’ said Susan.

‘I know, but just once in a while...’

‘Rebel,’ said Susan with a smile.

There was a slight pause.

‘Are you feeling alright now?’ asked Barbara. Susan nodded calmly. ‘Yes.’

‘What did happen?’

‘A noise. Very loud. A kind of slithering and screeching sound, amplified many times. I’ve heard it before—or something like it.’

‘Where?’

‘I can’t remember. I only know that I recognised it as something... evil.’ Susan gave a shudder.

Barbara glanced over her shoulder at the surrounding jungle. It looked thicker and darker than ever. Some of the trees were over two hundred feet tall.

Their massive branches interlaced to form a canopy of green which blotted out the sun. Lower down a subsidiary growth of vines and creepers stretched from trunk to trunk, creating a second, denser ceiling which had enclosed the wall like a giant, green wave.

I’ve never seen vegetation like it,’ said Barbara, in awe. ‘Do you think the key’s inside?’

‘It must be.’

Barbara approached the hidden entrance while Susan sprawled lazily on the ground.

‘You know, Susan, looking at this archway these things aren’t half as dense as they seem.’ She pulled a few creepers aside. ‘I’m sure we could get through.’

‘Maybe.’ Susan shifted her position on the coarse grass. Her leg itched and she brushed it idly with the back of her hand. The next instant something rough and wiry wrapped itself around her left thigh and began tugging her backwards across the ground. Susan let out a yell. Turning, Barbara saw a thick creeper entwined around Susan’s body, like a large snake.

Barbara ran across and tried to drag it off. The creeper twisted and writhed in her grip like a live animal.

She seized a heavy stone and hammered at it with all her might. It loosened its hold and Susan struggled free.

‘It was alive!’ sobbed Susan, trembling with fright.

‘It must have fallen on you from the tree.’

‘No it didn’t, Barbara... it didn’t. I tell you it was alive. It was trying to twine all around me!’

Barbara shook her. ‘Stop it, Susan! It’s just your imagination.’ She gestured towards the creeper which now lay motionless on the ground. ‘It couldn’t move by itself. You know it couldn’t.’

Susan pulled herself together. ‘No. I’m sorry.’

Barbara put her arm around the young girl. ‘Come and help me clear the archway.’

Susan managed a brave smile and together they began pulling at the loose vines.

After a while they had created a small tunnel and Barbara peered into it. The creepers had grown through the arch and over the wall, filling up what might once have been a small courtyard. Barbara thought she could see more stonework further in.

‘What is it?’ asked Susan eagerly.

‘I’m not sure. It’s so dark. It looks like a statue or something.’ Barbara

pushed through the tangled vegetation towards the far end of the tunnel.

‘Be careful,’ warned Susan from the entrance.

Working her way down Barbara could see it was a carved idol about fifteen feet tall set into a crumbling wall. The idol faintly resembled an Eastern Bhudda, squat and round with crossed legs and a large, pot belly.

Its face, however, was more like that of a gargoyle, with a gaping mouth and hideous, protruding eyes. Its arms were stretched out as though to embrace someone. On its head, in a small container, was a dazzling array of precious stones; diamonds, sapphires, ropes of pearl, emeralds and rubies set in bracelets of gold, as well as scores of lesser trinkets in silver and copper.

‘Please don’t go any further.’

Susan’s voice sounded dimly along the tunnel but Barbara pressed forward through the remaining creepers intent on reaching the idol. Amidst the jewels she had spotted the shining micro-circuit!

‘There doesn’t seem to be any other way in. Where’s Barbara?’

Susan found Ian, Altos and Sabetha at her elbow.

‘In there.’ She pointed to the archway. Barbara’s blue dress was barely visible through the wilderness of green.

‘Barbara! I told you to wait for us,’ yelled Ian angrily. He set off down the tunnel.

Barbara had clambered onto the base of the idol and was reaching up for something. ‘The key! I’ve found the key,’ she cried.

As she grasped the micro-circuit there was a click and a rumble of creaking machinery. Ian gazed in horror as the outstretched arms of the idol began to close around Barbara’s waist.

‘Help me, Ian! Help me!’

The statue started to revolve with Barbara clasped tightly in its arms. Screaming, Barbara managed to throw the key back into the tunnel before disappearing into the stone wall. When Ian reached it there was nothing to see but bare masonry. Altos arrived at his side.

‘You saw what happened?’

The young man nodded. ‘Is there no break in the wall? Perhaps a hidden spring?’

Ian scoured the stonework. ‘If there is I can’t find it.’ He leaned his head against the wall in desperation.

‘Let’s get out into the open for a minute. I can’t think in here.’ He backed off down the tunnel.

Altos stopped to retrieve the micro-circuit and followed.

On hearing what had happened Sabetha said,

‘Barbara was wearing her travel dial. Wasn’t she? As long as she isn’t injured she can escape whenever she wants.’

A rumbling from the tunnel attracted their attention. The idol was swinging back into place, its arms empty.

After a silence Ian said, ‘Either it has released her, or she’s escaped. She could be injured.’

‘If she has used the dial and gone on to the next destination we don’t know what danger she may be in there,’ said Sabetha.

‘We must cover all possibilities.’ Ian turned to Sabetha. ‘You must go on ahead with Susan and Altos. I’ll try to get inside. The statue worked once as a trap, it should work again. If there’s no sign of Barbara I’ll use my travel dial and follow you as quickly as I can.’

He took the micro-key from Altos and handed it to Sabetha. ‘I think you’d better put that on your chain with the other one. Right, off you go.’

Altos and Susan pressed their travel dials and disappeared.

‘Hurry up,’ said Ian to Sabetha who was still fiddling with the micro-key.

‘Wait a minute, Ian. There’s something wrong.’ She held up the micro-key. ‘It’s an imitation.’

Ian compared the key with the one Arbitan had given them.

‘This edge is a fraction shorter,’ said Sabetha pointing out the

discrepancy.

‘You’re sure about this? It’s not possible that there’s some slight variation in the genuine circuits?’

Sabetha shook her head decisively. ‘No. They’re all absolutely identical. This one must be an imitation.’

Ian sighed. ‘So we’re no better off than when we arrived here.’

‘Do you want me to stay with you?’

Ian thought quickly, ‘No, you’d better go after the others. They’re probably already worried about you. Tell them what’s happened and say I’ll follow as soon as I’ve found the real key.’

Sabetha nodded, then stepped forward and took hold of his hand.

‘Please... be careful.’ She eyed him steadily, her face regal and composed, framed by her long, blonde hair.

Ian felt the same as he had in the presence of her father. She was letting him know that the fate of her people might rest in his hands.

‘I will,’ he replied, solemnly.

Sabetha gave him a warm smile then twisted her travel dial and vanished.

Ian returned to the tunnel and pushed through the creepers to the base of the statue. He studied the grotesque sculpture carefully until he found a small ledge behind the right knee. He climbed up into the arms of the statue and pressed the ledge with his foot. The idol revolved slowly through one hundred and eighty degrees.

Ian found himself looking onto a courtyard, fronting a large decrepit stone mansion. Broken statues and pillars suggested a lost elegance.

The idol came to rest and released its grip. Ian slid to the ground with relief. Its stony embrace had not been a pleasant experience. He made his way to the centre of the courtyard. The vegetable invasion had continued unabated on this side of the wall. Limbless statues nested forlornly in the foliage, heroic warriors mourning the loss of a sword or head, beautiful maidens eyeing their ruined lovers with stoic equanimity.

As he skirted a gnarled, fierce warlord, he trod on a loose flagstone.

An odd, whirring noise started up. He glanced around but could not locate the source. Then he heard a scream.

'Ian! Behind you!'

He turned to see the warrior's massive axe hurtling towards him. He dived out of its path and the enormous blade drove into the earth inches from his ear. He scrambled to his feet, trembling, as Barbara ran out from the cover of a wall.

'You're not hurt?'

'Just a bit shaken. If you hadn't shouted I...' He tailed off, looking pale.

'That doesn't matter now,' gasped Barbara. 'Oh, Ian, I've been so frightened. I was waiting another half hour and if you hadn't come, I was going to use the travel dial.'

'I'm glad you waited. That micro-key you found was a fake.'

'What?'

'Yes. The real one must be hidden in here.'

Barbara gulped. 'Then I warn you, it's not going to be easy to find. This whole place is one huge booby trap.

It's full of things like that statue. I've hardly dared move for fear of setting one of them off.'

'Then we'll have to take it very slowly,' said Ian reassuringly. 'Over there seems a good place to start.' He indicated a wooden door set in a far wall.

Testing every step, they threaded their way across the courtyard to the door. They could now see that it led directly into the mansion. The roof had become entirely hidden by trees and creepers.

'The vegetation is everywhere,' whispered Barbara.

'It's almost as if it's trying to get into the house!' She recalled the incident with Susan.

'Let's find the key and get out of here,' said Ian. He tried the door. It was locked.

‘We’ll have to break it down. You stay here, I’ll see if I can find some tools.’ He set off warily across the courtyard.

‘I saw some iron bars in an alcove by the wall,’

Barbara called after him. She turned and re-examined the door. It was not in use. Small lichen and fungi were growing at the sides and a tough sucker-plant had forced its way under the bottom edge. She also noticed a window set high up in the wall. It had been punched in by a branch as wide as a man’s leg.

Barbara turned away from the building and looked for Ian. He had disappeared from sight but she could hear him somewhere in the far corner of the courtyard. A creaking noise behind her made her jump but there was nothing to see. A creeper brushed against her shoulder.

The creak occurred again. It came from the door. She gave it a push. This time it swung open. Puzzled, she called for Ian.

‘I’ll be right with you,’ came his reply.

Barbara peered inside the doorway. It opened into a large hallway, dark, airless and completely bare. A carpet of spongy green moss covered the floor. The walls were thick with vines. The atmosphere was moist and fetid, like a greenhouse. At the far end was a barred door, scarcely visible in the gloom.

Intrigued, Barbara took another step. As she did so there was a swishing noise and a large net fell on her from the ceiling. She struggled and flailed like a captured fish but only enmeshed herself more tightly in the strong cords. She stumbled to the floor. The noise of machinery started up. Barbara strained her senses to locate its source. A glint of metal in the half-light above caught her eye. Descending vertically from the ceiling were six steel prongs, each honed to a sharp point. She lay directly in their path.

6

The Whispering Darkness

A terrible scream echoed across the courtyard. Ian grabbed an iron bar from the ground and turned to run from the alcove. The bar caught on something. A hidden wire held it to the floor. He gave a fierce tug.

Instantly an iron grille clanged down over the alcove opening, trapping him inside.

‘Ian!’

Another bloodchilling scream came from the house.

Ian scrabbled frantically amongst a pile of rusty garden tools. He found a pick axe. Thrusting it between the bars of the grill he began forcing them apart.

Barbara tore at the netting in a frenzy. The steel spikes were moving inexorably nearer.

‘Help me! Please!’

As she writhed helplessly on the floor the far door in the hall opened slightly. A human eye observed her through the crack without emotion.

Sweating with fear, Ian managed to prise the bars fractionally apart.

The needle-sharp prongs were no more than a foot from Barbara’s prostrate body. Suddenly a pair of battered, leather boots stepped into her line of vision. The noise of the descending steel spikes ceased. The tips were three inchs from her face.

A querulous voice broke the silence. ‘Why do you come in search of the key?’

‘Help me,’ whispered Barbara, trembling with shock.

‘Who are you? What is your interest in the key?’

‘I can’t talk to you like this. Let me go.’ The bed of steel spikes prevented her from seeing her interrogator.

‘Are you the Voord?’ continued the voice, harsh and sceptical. ‘You do not resemble their race, and yet...’

‘Arbitan sent us.’

‘That’s a lie.’

‘It isn’t. He was alone on the island. He couldn’t send anyone else.’

‘What proof do you have?’

‘I don’t know. What’s happened to Ian? What have you done to him?’

There was a pause.

‘How can you prove Arbitan sent you?’

‘The travel dial. On my wrist.’ Barbara held out her arm. The stranger knelt down to unclip the dial and Barbara caught sight of his face. He was old and wrinkled with a thin grey beard. She noticed with surprise he wore a hooded robe like Arbitan’s.

‘I shall examine this,’ be said. ‘If it is assembled properly with the correct journey programme I shall know you speak the truth. Only Arbitan could have set your complete journey.’ He turned on his heel and disappeared through the far doorway.

‘What have you done to Ian?’ Barbara called after him—but the door was slammed shut.

Ian wrenched at the bars with all his strength, bending them an inch at a time. Finally, he managed to squeeze through.

In a few seconds he was across the courtyard and inside the house. He was brought up short by the sight of Barbara’s body apparently pinned to the floor by a bed of steel spikes. As he gazed in horror there was a muffled cry from deeper within the building. Seizing Barbara by the arms he dragged her clear of the spikes and realised with relief that she was unharmed.

The muffled cry rang out again.

‘In there, Ian,’ gasped Barbara, pointing down the hall. Through the gloom Ian made out the door. It was locked. He took a run at it, splintering the lock and smashing through into the room beyond.

On the far side of the room near a window a bearded old man was grappling with a mass of thick creepers entwined round his neck. The old man was blue in the face, in the last throes of consciousness. The room was full of plants. He seized a machete from a table and began hacking at the creepers around the old man. They thrashed violently from side to side like wounded animals before retreating through the broken window. Finally he managed to free the limp, moribund form and carry it gently to a bed in the corner.

As Barbara appeared the old man lifted his drooping eyelids and addressed them in a faint murmur.

‘It’s coming again... The jungle is coming. When you hear the whisper

start, it's death, I tell you, death!'

He gasped convulsively with the effort.

Barbara noticed a deep wound at the side of his head. She quickly fetched water and a strip of old blanket from a nearby table and bound the wound.

The old man was turning greyer by the minute.

'I'm afraid he's dying,' she whispered.

'He must have hit his head,' said Ian. 'It's almost as if he was dragged over by the creeper.' He gazed around the room incredulously. The thought of the jungle being alive in that way defied all logic.

The old man groaned and spoke. 'You... should...

not... stay here.'

Ian knelt close to the old man's ear. 'We came here for the micro-circuit,' he said urgently. 'Do you understand me? Arbitan sent us here.'

The name seemed to have an effect. The mouth twitched and the old man's eyes, misting fast, searched Ian's face eagerly.

'Has... Arbitan... really sent someone... at last...?'

'Yes.'

'Outside on the idol... I put a false micro-key round its neck.'

'I found it,' said Barbara softly.

'I know... I have... a system of mirrors. When the false key was taken... I set all my traps in motion. Only those warned by Arbitan... could elude them.' The old man's body heaved and his eyes started to wander.

'He's getting weaker all the time,' whispered Barbara. 'If only I could do something for him. I feel so helpless.'

'You must trust us,' said Ian. 'Tell us where the key is.' The old man lifted a finger and beckoned.

Ian put his ear close to the old man's lips. Barely audible, the old man

whispered what sounded like a secret code. '... D... E... Three... O... Two...'

'I don't understand,' said Ian. 'What do you mean?'

The old man was sinking fast. With a dying effort he pointed towards an inner door. 'Quickly... darkness...

The Whispering will start...'

With a gasp the old man fell back against the pillow and died. Ian drew a blanket over the lifeless body.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, then Barbara said, 'He pointed to this door. What did the numbers and letters mean?'

'Could be a combination to a safe. Let's see what we can find.' He crossed to the inner door and opened it.

It led into a laboratory of some sort. Although over-grown and abandoned like the rest of the building there was evidence of scientific endeavour. Broken test-tubes lay scattered about the room, storage jars lined the walls, and a number of luxuriant plants filled one corner, specimens which had long since burst their containers. A boarded window, a filing cabinet, some chests of drawers, a bureau, and a large, steel safe completed the contents of the room.

'You were right,' said Barbara, spotting the safe.

'And a combination one at that,' replied Ian, examining it.

'D... E... Three... O... Two,' repeated Barbara.

'There are only letters on the dial. Perhaps the figures are the number of turns?' Ian turned the dial accordingly but it remained locked.

'It's always possible he didn't mean the safe at all,'

said Barbara. They decided to search the room. An hour later they had drawn a blank. During a pause Barbara said, 'I've been trying to think back, Ian. What did he mean about "Darkness... the Whispering will start"?... Is that what Susan heard?'

'I think he was rambling,' replied Ian, his nose in a thick, leather-bound book. 'I'm hoping to find a lead in here. It's a diary of his experiments.'

Barbara leaned back exhausted against a pile of papers. ‘What was he working on?’

‘As far as I can make out he’d developed a hormone treatment that could accelerate the growth of plants.’ He read: ‘Nature has a fixed tempo of destruction. Water dripping on a stone may take a thousand years to produce any sign of wear.’

‘That’s not very original.’

‘It is if you could speed up the process. If the wear on the stone could be made in a day...’

‘But that’s ridiculous.’

‘Well, he didn’t seem to think so. He ends up by saying his growth accelerator has changed nature’s tempo of destruction entirely.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Barbara scrambling to her feet.

She crossed to the window. ‘Quite dark outside now,’ she remarked, peering through the cracks in the boarding.

She returned to the table and selected a book. ‘Have you been through this one?’ Ian shook his head. Barbara began leafing through it. For several minutes they both read in silence.

The sound began softly at first, a gentle brushing against the side of the house.

Ian felt his neck prickle. ‘What’s that?’

Barbara stared at him, suddenly pale.

‘It sounds like... like... whispering!’ Her eyes widened. ‘He said it would come with the darkness. It’s what Susan must have heard!’

‘But what’s causing it?’

‘Sssh. Listen.’

The noise was increasing, a scratching against the window and walls.

‘It sounds like something trying to get in.’

‘When we were outside you said that. About the jungle.’

Barbara stared at him in disbelief. ‘But it couldn’t...!’

‘Look!’ Ian pointed to the window. A tendril was forcing its way in through a crack. The whispering increased. Barbara imagined the jungle outside coming alive; giant shoots forcing their way up through the floor; massive tree-trunks splitting and bursting as they towered high above the roof; waves of creepers dashing themselves against the side of the house, spilling in through every crack, ready to engulf them in a sea of green.

‘That’s what he meant!’ yelled Ian. ‘The tempo of destruction... Don’t you see! Normally it would take fifty, even a hundred years for the jungle to overrun this place. Gradually it would encroach and finally swallow it up... now it’s all accelerated!’

‘Then... then the jungle *is* attacking us...!’

There was a terrific crack and a wooden board across the window was punched away. A large green tentacle snaked in and embedded itself in the far wall.

Jars, books, equipment were hurled to the floor as more creepers invaded the room. The walls began to crack and move inwards. A thick creeper ensnared Barbara’s ankle.

Ian stumbled trying to free her. Struggling to his feet he noticed the label of a broken jar. It read: DE302.

‘Barbara! That’s it! The key’s in one of the jars!’

The room was now filled with falling rubble which the threshing plants whipped up into a miniature storm.

The walls had split into large fissures allowing the vegetation to flow unimpeded across the room. Suddenly Barbara gave a shout. Clawing through the jar, her fingers had closed on something flat and shiny. She drew it out. Covered in white powder but clearly visible was the key! The advancing foliage was about to smother them.

Ian pointed wildly to his wrist. ‘Use the travel dial! Now!’

As the waving creepers closed over them Barbara and Ian twisted the dials and vanished.

Ian came to lying face down on a blanket of cold powder.

A rivulet of water trickled slowly down his neck. He felt cold and stiff. He struggled to his knees and looked at his wrist. The travel dial was still there. He became conscious of small, white flakes on his skin. Snow. Where was he?

He scrambled to his feet and glanced around. It was dark. Around him was an unbroken expanse of grey. A distant howling reached his ears. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he spied a body huddled awkwardly in the snow about twenty yards away.

'Barbara!' She was blue with cold and too weak to move. The force of the travel mechanism, coupled with the cold, had numbed her senses. Ian gave her a shake.

'Wake up, Barbara! We've got to move.'

Barbara's eyelids flickered open. 'I can't, I'm too cold...'

'You've got to. Unless we find shelter, we don't stand a chance!' He somehow hoisted her to her feet and set off with her through the snow.

A blizzard had risen and the wind cut into them like a knife. Barbara's thin cotton dress afforded no protection and Ian realised it would only be a matter of hours before they both died of exposure.

Barbara suddenly slipped from his grasp. 'It's no good, Ian... I can't... I'm so tired... sleep... I must sleep.'

Ian shook her vigorously. 'No, Barbara! We'll freeze to death.'

But the life was ebbing from her body and she slid like a dead weight into the snow. Ian tried to lift her but he could feel his own strength draining away. To carry on alone would be to leave Barbara to certain death. He sank to the snow beside Barbara and huddled up close to give her what warmth and protection he could.

Within a few minutes his limbs grew numb. He felt his will to live receding like a ghost into the surrounding darkness.

7

The Snows of Terror

Drugged with cold, Barbara's mind registered a far away sensation in her left side. She was being dug in the ribs by a hard boot. She opened

her eyes. A coarse, hideous face hovered above her. She gave a start and the lumpen features split into a gap-toothed grin. The nightmarish apparition extended a fur-covered arm and touched Barbara's cheek. Overcome with shock, she slumped back into the snow.

When Barbara regained consciousness the stranger was still peering down at her. He was a mountain of a man clothed in furs and tattered skins, like a Breughel peasant.

'Don't be afraid,' he said gruffly.

Barbara sat up. She was lying on a bare bunk covered with furs in what looked like a trapper's hut.

Animal pelts were stretched across the walls. There was a single window with shutters and a main door barred and bolted. In the hearth a log fire burned brightly.

'How did I... Ian?... Where's Ian?'

'Your friend is here.' The huge stranger gestured to where Ian lay curled asleep in a bundle of skins.

Barbara sank back onto the wooden bunk, relieved.

'Your hands are slightly frost-bitten,' boomed the giant trapper. 'Put them in mine.'

Barbara did as she was bid and he massaged them slowly between his ham-sized fists. 'You must help your friend like this too.'

Barbara nodded nervously.

The stranger gave a toothy grin. 'You are afraid of me?' He thrust his bristly face close to Barbara's.

'No.'

'Last year I broke the back of a wolf with my bare hands.' He stood up and patted his barrel-shaped chest.

'I am Vasor—most men fear me.' He pointed to her hands. 'There, see, the blood is beginning to return.'

'Thank you.'

'I'll get a warm drink for you both.' He stepped through a small door

leading to a kitchen at the back.

Barbara slipped down from her bunk and quickly crossed to Ian. She shook him vigorously. ‘Ian, wake up.’

Ian opened his eyes and looked around drowsily.

‘Where are we?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t even know how we got here.’

Vasor entered with two bowls of broth. ‘Ah, you’re awake. Good. Here, drink this.’

Ian took the bowl and eyed the huge stranger with surprise.

The hot liquid warmed his stomach. He turned to the big man. ‘Do we have to thank you for saving us on the mountain?’

Vasor shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘I found you when I was re-setting my traps.’ Then he added, ‘It was a difficult journey getting you back here to the hut.’

‘We would have frozen to death,’ said Barbara.

‘The wolves would have eaten you first.’

‘Wolves?’

‘Yes. There are more than ever this winter. I’ve counted a dozen packs, a score in each. They’re hungry.

They’re even raiding the villages at night.’

‘Are we in a village?’ ventured Barbara.

‘No. The nearest is three miles away. I stay out here to look after my traps.’

‘We’re grateful to you for finding us before the wolves,’ said Ian.

Vasor nodded. ‘One of you would have died anyway if it hadn’t been for the stranger. I couldn’t have carried you both.’

Barbara and Ian exchanged glances.

‘A stranger? What stranger?’ asked Barbara.

‘Oh, a madman,’ growled Vasor. ‘He came here early last night raving and ranting. I couldn’t talk to him.’ He stood up and kicked the fire with his boot. ‘I gave him some furs and went with him up the mountain.’

He paused and gave a sly look. ‘He was searching for a couple of girls.’

‘That must have been Altos!’ exclaimed Ian.

‘Where is he now?’ asked Barbara.

The big man’s eyes shifted uncomfortably. ‘In the village, I think. After we’d got you back here, he went out.’ Barbara looked puzzled. ‘Did he say he was coming back?’

‘Yes, but it’s getting dark again. He won’t be able to get over the ridge at night.’

‘We must go and help him,’ urged Ian.

Vasor shook his head. ‘There’s a storm coming up.’

Ian realised the big trapper would not be swayed. ‘I won’t ask you to come with me, but will you lend me warm clothing?’ he said.

The trapper eyed him shrewdly. ‘My furs are my living. I’m a poor man. I wouldn’t stand much chance of getting them back if you fell down a crevasse.’

‘I can’t pay you for them,’ explained Ian, ‘I haven’t any money.’

The big man’s glance strayed to the travel dial on Ian’s wrist. ‘That thing looks valuable.’

Ian unstrapped the dial and handed it over. ‘Now please, hurry.’

‘Alright,’ said Vasor and a queer grin played at the corners of his mouth. He disappeared into the back room. Barbara helped Ian into some furs.

‘What about Susan and Sabetha? How will you find them?’

Ian shrugged. ‘I’ll know more when and if I find Altos.’

Vasor reappeared with an old oil-lamp and a leather bag containing food. He unbolted the door and a flurry of snow blew into the room.

‘The village lies that way,’ he pointed. ‘When you get through the fir forest, you’ll see the lights.’

Ian nodded. ‘Thank you. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’ Giving Barbara a quick embrace he set off in the darkness.

Vasor quickly locked the door behind him and turned to Barbara. ‘There. We’re alone.’ He gave a funny chuckle.

Barbara shuddered and crossed to the fire. Vasor followed and put his large hands around her shoulders.

She broke away, trying to conceal her alarm. ‘He’ll be back,’ she said, ‘I know he will.’

‘We’ll see. Meanwhile I’ll get us some food. We must fatten you up, eh?’ He gave another little chuckle and disappeared.

Barbara stared at the fire. She felt very vulnerable.

The trapper’s morbid sense of humour had unnerved her. Outside, a lone timber wolf emitted a long, trailing howl. She shuddered and said a prayer for Ian’s safe return.

Ian lowered his head against the wind. The icy blast pummelled his cheeks and tore at his clothing, making progress slow and arduous. Every now and then, tossed towards him on the storm, came the distant howls of marauding wolves.

He trudged on for a good half-hour until suddenly he came across faint footprints in the snow.

He pressed on. In the darkness ahead he soon caught sight of a pitiful bundle half-buried beneath an over-hanging rock. It was Altos. But whether dead or alive, he could not tell. Ian hurriedly brushed away the snow. To his astonishment he saw the young man had been bound tightly hand and foot with a stout rope.

Barbara had finished her meal and pushed her empty bowl aside. There was an embarrassed pause. In the silence she could clearly hear the noise of baying wolves on the mountainside.

‘They sound so close,’ she said at last.

‘You’re safe here,’ grunted the big man. ‘That door will keep anything out... or in.’ He gave a cunning glance at Barbara from beneath his

bushy eyebrows. She turned away. Vasor rose from the table brusquely. ‘You clear those,’ he pointed to the bread and salt. He swept up the dirty bowls and took them into the kitchen.

Barbara placed the bread and salt in a cupboard then innocently opened a drawer to put away the spoons.

The contents made her start. Lying inside were three travel dials, the Doctor’s ring, and Sabetha’s chain with the keys.

‘What are you doing in that drawer?’

Barbara span round. Vasor was advancing on her, a vicious look in his eyes.

‘Where did you get these?’ Barbara stammered bravely. ‘One of the girls was wearing this.’ She held up Sabetha’s chain. ‘

‘You give me those,’ snarled Vasor. ‘They’re worth money.’ He snatched the valuables from her.

Shaking, Barbara retreated. ‘Where did you get them?’

‘There’s a cave on the mountain where I store my traps. I found two girls hiding there.’

‘Then they’re alive?’

‘They may be.’ The big man scowled. ‘That was yesterday. I gave them food and flint in return for these.

I left them there.’

Barbara studied his ugly features, uncertain if he was telling the truth. ‘Why didn’t you bring them back?’

‘I can’t afford to look after every fool that gets lost on the mountains.’

‘What about Altos? The young man?’

‘He forced me to go up the mountain to look for these girls. Instead we found you. When we brought you back here he wanted to go out again.’

Barbara coolly faced him. ‘I don’t believe you. You stole those things.’

‘Oh? Did I?’ The trapper took a threatening pace forward.

‘They might have given you the wrist bracelet, but Sabetha would never have parted with the keys and chain.’ An awful thought struck her. ‘You didn’t kill them?’

Vasor chuckled. ‘You don’t kill anybody in this country. The cold and the wolves do that.’

Altos rose unsteadily to his feet.

‘How are your legs?’ asked Ian.

‘I should be able to walk in a minute or two.’

‘Who tied you up?’

‘The trapper.’

‘But he rescued us.’

‘Only because I forced him to. He’s ruthless.’

Ian grew pale. ‘Barbara’s back there with him.

Alone!’

‘Then we must return as quickly as we can. Help me.’ He leaned on Ian’s shoulder and took a few, faltering steps.

‘Just a minute.’ Ian bent down to collect the bag of food given him by Vasor. In the cold his fingers fumbled and the contents spilled out onto the snow. His eyes widened with astonishment.

‘Raw meat! What on earth would Vasor want to give me that for?’

In the silence a wolf howled very close at hand.

‘There’s your answer,’ said Altos grimly. ‘Those beasts could scent meat a couple of miles away. Vasor was making certain you wouldn’t get back.’

Ian kicked the meat beneath the snow in disgust.

‘Well, he’s got a surprise coming to him, hasn’t he?’

The trapper sat at the wooden table, peering suspiciously at Barbara. She was seated by the fire.

Suddenly he rose without a word and halted a yard from her, a foolish grin on his ugly face. ‘There’s nowhere you can run.’

‘Keep away!’ Barbara snatched a hot poker from the smoking logs and held it before her. ‘Don’t you dare come near me.’

‘All right,’ Vasor said. He retreated to the table. ‘I’m in no hurry. There’s no-one coming to help you.’ He leered at her lasciviously.

Barbara gripped the poker tightly.

The wolves were closing in. Ian feared they had picked up their scent. Suddenly a pale, yellow dot appeared in the darkness ahead. It was the hut.

‘Another quarter of a mile,’ Ian yelled above the wind. ‘We’ll have to run! Altos.’

‘I’ll try.’

The two men broke into a jog. Behind them they could hear the scuffling pack homing in for the kill.

Barbara thought she heard a sound. Her glance flicked hopefully to the door.

In that instant Vasor leaped. For one so large he moved with astonishing speed. He swept the wooden table aside and was almost on her before Barbara pulled a chair into his path and darted to the opposite corner of the room. Valor hurled the chair aside and advanced nearer. Barbara grabbed a plate and heaved it full into his face. It broke across his nose, shattering into small pieces. Vasor brushed it off like a fly. He lurched towards her again. Cornered, she aimed a blow with the poker but he caught her arm easily and twisted it from her grip.

A hand like a ham-bone seized Barbara by the neck and slammed her against the wall, knocking the breath from her body. Then fingers like steel pincers bit into her throat, slowly throttling her.

8

The Demons

A thunderous hammering on the door of the hut momentarily distracted the trapper. In that instant Barbara jerked her neck free and

squirmed away. She flew to the door and shot back one of the bolts. Vasor hurled himself on her again. Pressed between his enormous bulk and the door she thought she would suffocate. In a desperate effort she wriggled beneath him and aimed a hefty kick at his shins. He clutched his leg, and Barbara shoved him off balance. She quickly released the remaining bolt. As Vasor staggered to his feet Ian crashed into the big man, knocking his head against the wall. Dazed and outnumbered, the big man decided to offer no further resistance.

Ian turned to Barbara. 'You alright?'

Barbara nodded. 'The girls are safe too,' she gasped.

'They're in a cave in the mountain.'

'I meant them no harm,' said Valor, 'I swear it. I gave them food and flint to light a fire...'

Altos advanced on the trapper. 'You treacherous...'

'No, Altos!' said Ian, stepping between them. 'We want him unharmed. He's going to show us where the cave is.'

For the first time, a look of fear appeared in the big man's eyes.

Susan bent over a pile of ashes and blew hard several times. There was no response and she soon gave up.

'It doesn't matter,' said Sabetha. 'There was hardly any wood left.' The two girls looked at one another despondently. They were huddled in a gloomy cavern deep in the mountainside.

At last Susan said, 'There's no point in us waiting here. We must go out and take a chance.'

'In these clothes we wouldn't last an hour.'

'How long do you think we'll last here without any fire?' Susan walked towards one of several tunnels which led into the cavern.

'That wasn't the way we came in,' said Sabetha. 'It was the opening on the right.'

Susan halted. 'I could have sworn it was this one.'

She studied the various entrances, trying to visualise how the trapper had brought them in.

‘Well, if you’re certain,’ said Sabetha.

‘I thought I was certain. You’ve made me doubtful now.’ ‘Come on, let’s try it,’ urged Sabetha finally. They set off down the tunnel.

Ian decided to wait for dawn before setting out for the mountain. Vasor provided hot food and drink and some extra furs for Altos and Barbara. Then, just before light, the four of them left the hut and struck out across the snow. The blizzard had died away and the morning air was crisp and clear.

They trudged in silence for an hour. Vasor seemed increasingly nervous as they neared the mountain. ‘How much further?’ asked Ian.

‘Just beyond the next ridge.’ Vasor turned to Ian.

‘When I get there... can I go back?’ A troubled look appeared on the trapper’s face.

‘You’re getting no promises out of me,’ replied Ian.

‘Come on.’ He prodded Vasor in the back. Grudgingly, the big man set off again.

Susan and Sabetha felt their way gingerly along a narrow tunnel. The walls and roof were lined with patches of ice.

Susan could not help feeling they were moving deeper into the mountain instead of towards the surface. Her suspicions were confirmed when they rounded the next bend and ran into a blank wall of rock.

‘I’m sorry, Sabetha.’

The blonde girl took her hand. ‘It’s not your fault.

We’ll retrace our steps. Come on.’ She led Susan gently back down the tunnel.

Ian and the others reached the lee of the mountain. The trapper led them through a narrow chine which snaked into the mountain itself. It brought them to a tunnel.

Vasor guided them into it, his oil-lamp casting yellow shadows on the rough walls.

After about eventually twenty minutes the tunnel opened into a large

empty cavern.

‘They’re not here,’ said Ian grimly.

Vasor knelt beside a pile of grey cinders. ‘There’s been a fire.’ He glanced slyly at Ian. ‘I told you I helped them.’

Ian rubbed the ash between his fingers. ‘They can’t have been gone long.’

‘Is there another way out of these caves?’ asked Barbara.

Vasor hesitated. ‘No. The way we came is the only exit from the mountain.’

Altos crossed to the far side of the cave and peered down the various openings.

‘How far do these tunnels go?’ he asked.

‘Right through the mountain.’

‘They must have gone in deeper,’ said Ian. ‘Lead on, Vasor.’

The big man’s face filled with alarm. ‘No, no, we mustn’t. There are demons in there. I cannot go on.’

‘I am not asking you, Vasor, I’m telling you. Now move!’

Vasor glanced wildly about him. Clearly some deep-rooted fear had taken hold of him. Finally, he muttered something under his breath and set off down one of the openings. The others followed warily.

Susan halted. ‘It’s no use... we’re going deeper into the mountain.’ Her voice echoed plaintively along the rocky tunnel.

‘If we keep going we must find a way out,’ urged Sabetha.

They continued on. The path suddenly ran out onto a broad ledge. They had arrived at a deep crevasse—

perhaps once an ancient subterranean river or glacier running under the mountain. The chasm was at least twenty feet wide. Someone had strung a flimsy rope bridge across the gap suitable for only one person at a time to use.

Susan tested the bridge warily.

‘Is it safe?’

‘I think so.’ Holding firmly onto the supporting ropes Susan began to inch her way across.

‘Don’t look down,’ warned Sabetha.

An icy draught of air rose from the chasm below, causing the bridge to sway from side to side. Susan kept her eyes glued to the far wall and slowly completed the crossing. Sabetha followed carefully and the two girls set off down the tunnel on the far side.

Vasor tugged at Ian’s sleeve. ‘Please, we mustn’t go on. I told you the truth when I said there were demons here.’

He glanced over his shoulder nervously. ‘There are men who have seen them.’

‘Well, who knows?’ replied Ian. ‘You might see them too.’ He prodded Valor’s broad back. ‘Keep moving!’ The trapper gave him an evil look and moved off reluctantly.

As they rounded the next bend Altos gave a cry.

Before them stretched the underground chasm, spanned by the rope bridge. Ian stepped forward and examined it. If they went carefully it would probably hold. He began organising the crossing.

Vasor stood apart, silently eyeing the bridge.

Susan and Sabetha had almost given up hope of finding their way out when suddenly they came upon a wide, vaulted chamber. At its centre stood a large rectangular block of ice about twelve feet square. The girls approached it with awe. Its surface was perfectly smooth and was transparent to a depth of several feet. Susan walked admiringly around it then peered inside. She let out a scream of horror. A human face, pale and contorted, was staring at her from within the ice.

A few moments later Susan and Sabetha hurtled out of the tunnel on the far side of the chasm and knocked into Altos and Barbara, who had crossed over. There was a moment’s astonishment then the four greeted each other warmly.

‘Hang on, I’m coming over!’ yelled lan. In his delight at seeing the two girls he pushed past Vasor and ran across the bridge.

Susan pointed back down the tunnel. ‘There’s someone in there. In the ice!’

They were interrupted by a cry from Altos. Vasor was hacking through the ropes supporting the bridge on the far side.

Ian leaped onto the bridge. As he did so Vasor aimed a final blow and the remaining rope parted. The bridge plunged into the chasm with Ian still hanging on it. Miraculously he maintained his grip as the flimsy structure smashed against the side of the crevasse.

Barbara and Altos looked on helplessly as he dangled over the yawning drop. Although dazed, he began to inch his way back up the ropework. As he neared the ledge Altos leaned over and hauled him to safety.

Across the chasm, Vasor let out a fiendish cackle and turned to go.

Ian called to him. ‘Vasor, wait!’

The giant trapper pointed a mocking finger at the stranded group. ‘No,’ he roared. ‘You wait... Wait there for ever... There’s no other way out.’ His coarse laughter echoed around the immense cavern and the next moment he had vanished.

Nobody spoke.

Finally, Barbara peered over the edge at the useless bridge. ‘How do we get across?’

Ian, angry with himself, said, ‘I don’t know. It’s too wide to jump.’

‘Maybe we can find some planks and logs and lay them across?’

The likelihood of finding the right materials was so remote as to be laughable. But what else could they do?

It was just possible that whoever built the bridge may have left something lying about. They entered the tunnel.

The entrance was narrow and sloped downwards beneath a massive lintel of solid ice. As they stepped through there was a loud creak. They peered upwards into the gloom. The lintel of ice, which must have weighed several tons, was supported at one end by a piece of rock wedged into the wall.

‘Keep down as you go under,’ said Ian to the others.

Several minutes later they arrived in the large chamber.

Ian hurried forward to examine the iceblock. After a moment he beckoned Susan over.

'Is this what you saw?'

Susan peered into the ice. Frozen deep at its core were four figures, armed and helmeted like ancient warriors. Their faces were strangely distorted by the refracted light.

She nodded. 'They seem so lifelike.'

'They must be the demons that Vasor talked about,'

said Ian.

Sabetha suddenly pointed excitedly. 'Look! It's the key!' Above the warriors' head, locked into the ice, was a small, square rock. On it was the micro-circuit. 'Guarded by four dead warriors,' said Ian.

Barbara called out, 'There's a pipe here with a valve or something.' She gave it a twist. There was a faint gurgling noise.

'It's melting,' remarked Susan, pointing to the block of ice. Water had begun to drip from the sides.

'While we're waiting let's see what we can do about the bridge,' suggested Ian.

Half an hour later he and Altos had managed to prise two very long icicles from the roof of the chamber and drag them to the chasm's edge. They lashed them together with rope from the bridge and slid them carefully across the gap until they lodged on the other side. 'With any luck they'll freeze together,' said Ian. 'But we'll need some more to pack in at the sides.'

In the chamber most of the iceblock had melted, flooding the floor to a depth of six inches. The four warriors, freed as far as their waists, slumped forward like drunken men. Their weapons dangled harmlessly by their sides.

Behind the warriors, still imprisoned in the ice, lay the key. Sabetha watched patiently as the transparent shield melted layer by layer.

Barbara heard Ian and Altos approaching. 'It's alright,' she called out, 'the ice has nearly melted.'

The two men arrived in time to see Sabetha pick her way through the fallen slabs and remove the key. She turned and beamed at them, her face radiant with joy.

'Ian,' called out Susan, 'Look at these weapons.' She was examining one of the warriors. 'I wouldn't like to come across him in a battle.'

She bent down to get a closer look. The face, deathly pale like sculpted alabaster, stared unseeing at the floor.

Gingerly Susan fingered his resplendent tunic and tested the razor-sharp edge of his sword. As she turned away, her heart missed a beat. Had she caught a movement in the warrior's eye? She looked again. His knuckles were tightening about the hilt of his sword! Susan stood rooted to the spot as the warrior's head screwed slowly round to face her.

She screamed. 'He's alive!... He's alive!'

Ian looked up and saw the four warriors rising from the ice like ghosts. 'Get out of here! Run!'

They raced for the exit.

The warriors, stiff and cumbersome, lurched menacingly after them.

Within minutes they were all at the crevasse, except for Ian. Susan gazed nervously at the slender bridge the men had built. It was no more than a foot wide, a brittle, slippery thread of ice spanning the deep chasm. It would never support them all, not even singly. A daring thought struck her. Unnoticed by the others, she hauled in the fallen end of the rope bridge. Grasping it firmly in one hand, she crawled out onto the narrow strip of ice.

Barbara suddenly caught sight of her. 'Susan!'

The others turned and gasped with dismay.

'It'll never take her weight,' exclaimed Altos. 'It can't have frozen yet.'

But Susan was already halfway across. The long poles of ice bent unnaturally in the middle beneath her.

Very slowly she inched her way forward.

Ian reached the narrow gap surmounted by the large, hanging lintel. He broke off a long, pointed stalactite and levered away the small rock

supporting the lintel. The great mass of ice thudded to the floor with a boom, blocking the tunnel. Then, gripping the stalactite as a club, he waited.

Susan was three feet from the far side of the crevasse when she felt the bridge give way. She hurled herself across the remaining gap. Her fingers clawed desperately at the rim of the chasm. For one agonising moment it seemed she was slithering to her death. But she dug her fingernails into the icy surface and slowly pulled herself to safety. Then she hauled the broken end of the rope bridge and secured it firmly around the retaining pillar.

A sharp blade thudded through the ice nearly slicing off Ian's shoulder and the head of the leading warrior burst through. Ian dealt him a fierce blow with his ice-club.

The makeshift weapon shattered into tiny pieces. The others were safely over the bridge when Ian raced into view. Altos held the ropes steady as Ian plunged recklessly across.

'Right, you carry on,' yelled Ian. 'I'll catch you up.'

Altos hurriedly shepherded the girls away.

Ian began untying the holding ropes just as the leading warrior appeared. Wielding an enormous broadsword he waded onto the bridge. He was almost across when Ian unfastened the last rope and the bridge swung into the crevasse. The soldier plummetted to his death, screaming. Ian hurried off. The remaining warriors began hacking at the icy walls to construct another bridge.

In his hut Vasor sat gloating over the stolen valuables; the travel bracelets, the Doctor's ring, and the two strange plastic keys. He could barter a rich reward for these little trinkets. And there was no-one left to ask awkward questions.

His musings were interrupted by a loud crash as Ian and Altos burst in followed by the girls. Amazement, alarm, and fear animated Vasor's face in quick succession.

'We've come to collect our things, Vasor,'

announced Ian boldly. He strode to the table and gathered up the valuables.

'No, no, no...' cried Vasor, more in astonishment than anger.

Ian handed out the bracelets and entrusted Sabetha with the rest. ‘Now we can keep our date with the Doctor.’

Bewildered by the sudden turn of events Vasor decided to escape. He sidled towards the open door but quickly withdrew, his eyes crazed with terror. The devils from the mountain! They’re coming here!’ He slammed the door and drove home the bolts.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to entertain them alone, Vasor,’ said Ian drily.

An axe-blade bit through the door. Vasor, emboldened by terror, drew his knife. ‘You’ll stay or I’ll kill her!’ He grabbed Susan. The others stood powerless as he placed the knife at her throat. Suddenly he groaned and slumped forward. Screaming, Susan shook herself free. The warrior’s axe had cut clean through the door and plunged into the big man’s kidneys. The next moment the door flew off its hinges and the three warriors crashed into the room.

‘The dials!’ yelled Ian. ‘Twist the dials!’

The warriors raised their weapons and charged the defenceless group. But they found themselves slicing the empty air. Their victims had vanished. Only Vasor’s enormous hulk remained, like a dead whale at their feet.

Ian materialised alone in a bare, windowless corridor.

Immediately in front of him stood a solid metal door slightly ajar. He stepped forward and peered through.

Inside was a small room, also windowless. The iron door provided the only entry to the room, which seemed to be underground. The walls were hung with ornamental antique weapons and in the centre stood four glass display cases, like those found in museums. Lying in front of the nearest case was the body of a young man.

Ian bent down to examine him. There was a deep wound on the man’s forehead but no other sign of injury.

He wore a black military uniform and looked like a guard of some sort.

Beside him on the floor lay a large, spiked mace. Ian picked it up and studied it. It seemed the likely murder weapon. He replaced it beside the body. His attention was then caught by the contents of the nearest display case. Mounted on black velvet beneath the glass was the

fourth key of Marinus!

At that moment he heard a slight movement behind him. Before he could turn, a heavy object smashed violently against the back of his skull and he fell to the floor, unconscious.

The unseen attacker broke the glass display case and swiftly removed the key. There was a clang of alarm bells.

The figure retreated into the corridor and closed the iron door, locking Ian and the dead body inside.

9

Sentenced!

Ian awoke. He was lying on the floor next to the dead body. Someone had covered it with a sheet. He staggered to his feet and glanced at the display case. An ugly hole in the glass marked where the key had lain.

A voice behind him said 'Do you want to tell me where you've hidden it?'

The speaker was seated on a chair near the door.

He wore an immaculate, black uniform, officer's boots, and a wide, leather belt with gun holster. He was about twenty-five years of age, clean-shaven, with short, smoothly-brushed hair.

'Who are you?' asked Ian, taken aback.

'My name is Tarron.' The stranger spoke in cultured, clipped tones. 'I am Interrogator of the Guardian Division. Do you feel well enough to talk now?'

He fingered the buttons on a small recorder.

'Well, my head's pretty sore.' Ian looked around.

'What happened here?'

The Interrogator gave him a cool stare. 'I'm waiting for you to tell me.'

'I don't know very much. I came through that door...'

‘It was unlocked?’

‘It was half open. I saw a body lying on the floor. I bent down to look at it and... somebody hit me from behind.’

The Interrogator frowned. ‘You could not have come through that door unless the guard inside let you in.’

‘I told you, the door was open.’

The young man rose and walked up to Ian. ‘This is a maximum security vault. No-one is admitted until they have undergone a complete probity check. There is no record of you ever having completed any such check.’

‘Well, of course there isn’t!’ retorted Ian. ‘I’ve never been here before.’

‘However, you did get inside,’ resumed his inquisitor smoothly. ‘I have to assume you either tricked the guard or you were in league with him.’

‘Now wait a minute, this is nonsense. I’ve told you how I got in.’

Tarron gave a thin smile. ‘Yes, and I’m recording all your answers. Are you going to be helpful?’

‘As far as I can, but I promise you I don’t know...’

‘Well, let’s be sensible about this.’ The young interrogator adjusted a control on the recorder. ‘Name?’

‘Ian Chesterton.’

‘You’re a visitor to this district?’

‘Yes.’

‘Your work?’

After a slight hesitation, ‘Science teacher.’

‘Mmm. You know the purpose of the micro-circuit?’

Ian remained silent.

‘No reply.’ The young man stared at the ceiling then threw Ian an icy look. ‘It would make my report complete if you would tell me how

you got rid of the micro-circuit.'

'I didn't get rid of it. I never had it! I saw it in its case just before I was hit on the head.'

Tarron remained unperturbed. 'While you were unconscious my men searched the room. They searched you and the body of the guard. They didn't find it. Now,'

he said, drumming his fingers on the recorder box, 'what did you do with it?'

Ian sighed with exasperation. 'I haven't done anything with it. I've told you all I know.'

Tarron regarded him sceptically then crossed to the door. 'Alright.' He pressed a button and spoke into an intercom. 'Open your side, we're coming out.'

The door was unlocked from the outside by a waiting guard. Tarron gestured for Ian to leave.

'Where are we going?'

'The Guardian building. You will be charged formally.'

'Charged? What with?'

'Murder.'

Ian felt the colour drain from his cheeks. 'Wait a minute—Tarron, is it?'

'Yes.'

Ian gestured towards the guard. Tarron stepped back into the room and shut the door.

Ian looked him in the eye. 'I've told you the truth.'

The young soldier remained impassive. 'That isn't for me to decide.'

'There was another man here,' insisted Ian. 'He hit me. I've got the bruise to prove it.' He massaged the back of his head tenderly.

'The dead man could have hit you before he was killed.' Tanon spoke with no emotion, as though logic more than human feeling was his

true concern.

‘I suppose I killed him when I was unconscious,’

said Ian with sarcasm.

‘It does suggest you had an accomplice, I agree. So you’d better produce him. That’s my advice to you for what it’s worth.’ Tarron flicked a speck of dirt from his uniform and turned to the door.

‘I don’t have to produce him,’ Ian said, jabbing a finger at the elegant figure in front of him ‘You do.

Circumstantial evidence is not enough. You must prove that I was the actual murderer.’

The inquisitor’s hard gaze fell upon him. ‘That is contrary to our legal system.’

‘What?’

‘You are already guilty of this crime. The burden of defence is entirely yours. You must prove beyond any shadow of doubt that you’re innocent, otherwise...’ He looked down at his slender, manicured hands.

‘Yes?’

‘You’ll die.’

Ian turned pale.

‘If you take my advice, you’ll get someone to speak for you at the tribunal: Do you know anybody in the city?’ Ian gave a hollow laugh. Then he noticed the travel dial on his wrist. The Doctor! He was already here.

‘There is one man,’ he said. ‘If I can find him.’

‘You’d better locate him quickly,’ observed Tarron.

‘The tribunal sits in two days.’

He summoned the guard and Ian was led away.

Forty-eight hours later Ian was still confined to his cell. He had drawn a blank on the whereabouts of the Doctor but through intermediaries

had been informed of the arrival of Barbara and the others.

On the morning of the trial Barbara and Altos presented themselves as instructed to the duty officer outside the courtroom. The officer, whose name was Larn, had an open, friendly face. He told them they had been granted permission to attend the Court proceedings.

'But,' he warned them, 'there must be no disturbances of any kind. The law is very rigid. Offenders can be sent for one year to the glass factories in the desert, instantly and without trial.'

Barbara looked suitably impressed.

'Chief Enquirer Tarron has arranged for you to speak to your friend,' he continued, 'but you are not to give him any packets or articles not previously examined by me.'

Barbara and Altos gave their assent and retired to a nearby bench. Susan and Sabetha were to meet them there shortly. Barbara hoped they would have some news of the Doctor. Five minutes later they were escorted in.

'Any luck?'

Susan shook her head sadly. 'No sign of him anywhere.'

'But several people saw him two days ago,' added Sabetha, 'after Ian was arrested.'

Altos drew near to avoid being overheard. 'I've failed to discover any news of my friend Eprin either.'

'At least they're going to let us speak to Ian,' said Barbara.

'Can't we all make a run for it?' whispered Susan.

'No, it's too dangerous.'

They glanced around. The building was filling up.

Court dignitaries and officious-looking clerks scurried busily back and forth.

Suddenly Ian was led in. He looked drawn and haggard. He was accompanied by an immaculately dressed officer whom Barbara guessed was the Chief Enquirer. He led Ian over to the others and left them to talk for a moment.

‘How are you?’ asked Barbara. She was shocked by Ian’s tired and dishevelled appearance but tried not to show it.

‘They’re treating me well enough. Any news of the Doctor?’

‘We think he’s here but we haven’t been able to contact him.’

‘We must, Barbara, we must!’ exclaimed Ian. ‘The laws here are a mockery.’

‘I quite agree my boy!’ said a chirpy voice behind them. They whirled round. The Doctor, alert and bright, stood beaming at them in his usual manner.

‘Grandfather!’ Susan flung her arms around him.

The others greeted him warmly.

The commotion attracted Chief Enquirer Tarron who stepped across to the group. ‘This man is known to you?’ he asked with surprise.

‘Yes,’ replied Susan proudly.

The Doctor drew Ian aside. ‘Chesterton, you and I must have a talk.’

‘Not much time for talking, Doctor.’ Ian pointed to the courtroom doors. ‘I go in there in a moment to face an accusation of murder. I need someone to defend me.’

The Doctor drew himself up to his full height. ‘I will defend you!’ be said. His eyes danced mischievously.

A few minutes later the entire party were escorted to their seats inside the courtroom. The room was of an imposing ultra-modern design and was filled with several hundred people. They fell silent as Ian was led in. At the far end of the courtroom was a long U-shaped table.

Behind it were seated the three judges, dressed in full-length robes of a dull purple colour. Their heads were crowned with tall, cylindrical hats similar to those worn by Eastern Orthodox priests.

Ian was guided to a small, raised dais immediately in front of the judges where he faced them alone. Curving past him to his right and left ran the long arms of the U

so that defence and prosecution counsels, seated at either end, were not within his line of vision. The Doctor was led to the left-hand end

where a carved shield lay on the table before him. The Prosecuting Counsel, a tall, grey-faced man with a supercilious look, was already in position. Before him on the table lay an ornamental axe.

'Symbol of attack,' thought the Doctor.

Barbara and the others were positioned in the front row of spectators. A few paces ahead of them, in a neutral position, sat Tarron, the Chief Enquirer.

The middle judge, the most senior, cleared his throat and read from a paper in serious tones:

'Our decision on the report by Chief Enquirer Tarron is that the prisoner, Ian Chesterton, is guilty of murder, and that his sentence is death, the said sentence to be administered three days after the end of this hearing, unless...' he paused and glanced towards the Doctor, 'the representative for the accused can show positive proof why the execution should not be carried out.' Barbara looked along the row at Susan and the others. They sat pale and still. The judge continued, addressing the Doctor.

'Representative for the Defence, you have a grave duty. You have offered your services in this matter, which complies with the laws of the city of Millenium, in that any person may speak on behalf of another. Are you acquainted with our laws?'

'I have made some study of them,' replied the Doctor modestly.

'Every latitude will be allowed to you, and if you are at fault, I will give you directions.'

The Doctor gave a polite nod. 'Thank you.'

The judge then called upon the Representative for the Court, Eyson, to outline the case for the Prosecution.

The tall lawyer rose to his feet and in an arrogant, drawling voice outlined his case to the Court.

During his peroration, which took about thirty minutes, Ian stood motionless, head lowered. Only once, when Eyson pointed an accusing finger at him and used the word 'murderer', did Ian turn and give him a cold, hard stare.

When he had finished the judge said,

‘Representative for the Court, Eyson, has stated his facts.

You may reply.’ He nodded to the Doctor.

The Doctor stood and faced the court. ‘I cannot defend a man when I have not considered every aspect of the case,’ he announced confidently. ‘I ask for time to examine witnesses, read copies of statements, and prepare my defence.’ He sat down abruptly. A ripple of surprise ran through the spectators.

Eyson leaped to his feet. ‘I object most strongly,’ he protested.

‘The demand is reasonable in itself,’ remarked the judge. ‘The crime of murder in Millenium is unusual.’

He consulted his fellow judges in a low whisper then addressed the Doctor. ‘I grant you two days.’

The three judges rose and left the courtroom. Eyson crossed the well of the court and shook the Doctor’s hand. ‘I congratulate you,’ he said coldly.

‘Thank you.’

‘It will not alter the outcome.’

‘We shall see.’ The Doctor gave him a penetrating look. Eyson bowed courteously and walked away.

Ian descended from the dais and patted the Doctor on the back. ‘Well done.’

‘I’ve been studying their law ever since I heard Eprin had been murdered,’ replied the Doctor quietly.

‘Eprin!’ Altos caught the name as he approached and turned pale. ‘My friend.’

The Doctor nodded sadly. ‘Yes. I met him. We arranged to steal the micro-circuit as soon as you arrived.

Something must have happened to make him try to take it earlier.’

‘And he was killed,’ Sabetha said flatly.

There was a moment’s silence.

‘That is our one chance,’ continued the Doctor gently. ‘Eprin said he would need help. He must have told his plans to someone else. That someone else killed him and took the key.’

‘We have to find out why the key was stolen and who took it,’ said Ian.

‘In two days?’ Altos looked pessimistic.

‘We’ll need every minute of them,’ said the Doctor.

‘Altos and Sabetha, murder seems to be a rare crime here; go to a library and study all the case histories you can find. I want facts and figures. Meet me here in three hours.’

Altos and Sabetha disappeared.

‘What do I do?’ asked Susan.

‘You and Barbara are going to be my detectives.

And you, my friend,’ he turned to Ian.

‘Yes?’ Ian still wore a hunted look.

‘Trust me.’ The Doctor patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

Ian was led away to his cell. Then, at the Doctor’s request, he, Barabara and Susan accompanied Tarron to the scene of the crime in the Treasure Vault.

Once inside, the Doctor asked the Inquirer to explain the exact circumstances surrounding the discovery of the crime. He did so in his clipped, precise tones.

‘There was a mace beside the body with blood on it.

Chesterton was on the floor unconscious. Either he had slipped and banged his head, or Eprin had got a blow in before he died.’

The Doctor glanced round the room. ‘And the micro-circuit was gone, you say?’

‘Yes. That’s the only element of the case I don’t understand. My men did a heat reflector search of the room. It is absolutely certain that the circuit is not in here. It is equally certain that it has not been taken from here.’ The Chief Enquirer shrugged as though he, for one, saw no

point in pursuing the matter further.

‘Oh, come now, Tarron,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re not dealing in magic. It’s obvious that the circuit must have been taken from the room.’

‘No. Every person that came in here was checked by the Orza ray scanners as they went out. If anyone had the circuit on them, the scanner would have detected it.’ He smiled complacently.

‘What if the murderer had hidden it on the body of the dead man?’ asked Susan.

‘He has been searched. It wasn’t there.’

The Doctor glanced down at the floor. A chalked outline now marked the spot where the body had lain.

His gaze shifted to the broken display case. ‘Tell me exactly what happened after the alarm bell sounded,’ he said.

Tarron gave a rather bored look and continued.

‘Well, the relief guard was the first to reach the outside of the door. He was joined almost at once by the Security Controller and a Guardian who was on patrol. When I arrived, the door was open and... well, you know what we found inside.’

‘But that’s fantastic!’ exclaimed Susan. ‘The circuit couldn’t vanish into thin air.’

‘Precisely,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘And I fancy that when we discover it’s location, we will also discover the identity of the real murderer.’

‘We know the murderer,’ observed Tarron drily. ‘It was Chesterton.’

The Doctor smiled politely. ‘Mr Tarron, I wonder if you’d be good enough to leave us alone for a few minutes? We’d like to discuss a few aspects of this matter between ourselves, Mmm?’

The young man stared at the Doctor’s smiling but determined face. ‘Very well.’ He bowed and left.

Barbara pounced on the Doctor. ‘Any ideas?’

The Doctor scrutinised the ceiling. His fingers played with the lapels of his coat.

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Have you any idea how the circuit got out of here?’

The Doctor’s piercing blue eyes fixed themselves on Barbara. ‘Oh, that. Mmm. Elementary, elementary.’ He waved a hand dismissively.

‘You know!’ cried Susan. ‘Where?’

‘Oh, all in good time.’ The Doctor grinned secretively. ‘What’s more important, I think I know who did the killing.’

10

The Mystery of The Locked Room

‘Who?’ asked Susan in astonishment.

‘Ah!’

Barbara eyed the Doctor suspiciously. ‘How do you know? Tarron’s been working at it all day. You’ve only been here five minutes.’

The Doctor sniffed contemptuously. ‘Tarron has never doubted that Chesterton was guilty. Grave error.

Very grave.’

‘Whereas,’ began Susan tentatively, ‘we know he’s innocent?’

‘Precisely, my child. But,’ he raised a forefinger dramatically, ‘somebody committed the murder. So, we know there must have been a third man in this room.

We’ll come to how he got inside in a moment. But let’s assume he was hiding... here.’ He crossed and stood behind the open door. ‘Now, Barbara. Imagine for a second that you are Chesterton. Stand here.’ He placed Barbara in the doorway. ‘Now. You look inside, you see a body on the floor...’

‘I’ll be the body,’ said Susan. She lay down near the display case.

The Doctor turned to Barbara. ‘Now... what do you do?’ Barbara, flustered, said, ‘Well, I’d go to see if I could help.’

‘Good. Good. Then do it.’

Barbara cautiously approached ‘the body’ in front of the shattered display case.

‘There’s a weapon beside the body,’ instructed the Doctor. ‘Would you examine it?’

Barbara paused. ‘I might. Yes, I suppose I would.’

She knelt down beside Susan and picked up the imaginary weapon.

‘You look up,’ continued the Doctor, ‘you see in front of you the very thing you came here to get, the micro-circuit!’ Barbara rose and looked into the broken cabinet.

‘But,’ whispered the Doctor theatrically, ‘unseen by you, the third man has left his hiding place and is creeping up behind you...’ He moved stealthily up behind Barbara and raised a hand to strike her. Barbara turned and gave a little gasp.

‘You are struck down!’ The Doctor simulated a violent blow to Barbara’s head.’ Barbara winced. The Doctor’s love of realism was a bit unnerving.

‘So,’ the Doctor continued, ‘now our third man takes what he came for. He smashes the glass, lifts the key, and the bells ring. He has only a few seconds now.

He conceals the key, runs to the door, gets out, closes it...

He can’t go further because guards and officials are already on their way, so...’ the Doctor paused, ‘he pretends to be the first on the scene.’

‘The relief guard?’ ventured Susan.

‘Yes.’ The Doctor beamed with pleasure at the astonished faces of the two women.

‘Of course!’ exclaimed Barbara. ‘That’s why Eprin on the inside opened the door in the first place. He knew him, even expected him!’

‘He went in,’ concluded the Doctor, ‘killed his col-league, heard Chesterton in the hall and hid behind the door. The rest of it we know.’

‘That’s it!’ shouted Susan excitedly. ‘That must be the way it

happened. Let's tell Tarron.'

The Doctor held up a hand. 'No. Not yet. This is a theory. We need proof.'

'But you say you know where the micro-circuit is?'

Barbara looked puzzled. 'Surely that's proof.'

'If Tarron were to find that out,' explained the Doctor, 'his case against Chesterton would be complete.

At the moment I couldn't prove that Chesterton didn't hide it in its present location.'

'Wherever that is,' said Susan crossly. She was annoyed with the Doctor for not telling them.

'So what are we going to do?' asked Barbara.

The Doctor addressed them both conspiratorially. 'I have a little errand for you. I think you might find it interesting.'

Altos and Sabetha spent the best part of the day in the City's Legal Archives. After informing the Doctor of their researches they visited Ian in his cell. They told him of the Doctor's theory concerning the second guard, whose name apparently was Aydon. When they had finished Ian nodded thoughtfully. He recollected the expression on the guard's face when he and Tarron had first emerged from the Treasure Vault on the day of the murder. The man had seemed more than normally interested in their conversation. Sabetha then explained that Barbara and Susan had gone to interview him.

'You mean to tell me the Doctor has sent those two off to talk to a possible murderer?'

Sabetha nodded.

Ian leaped to'his feet. 'I hate being caged up like this,' he snapped, 'I'm so... so absolutely helpless.' He banged the wall with his fist.

'Sabetha and I have prepared a string of case histories for the Doctor,' said Altos optimistically.

Ian glanced up sharply.

'I know the laws seem strange,' said Sabetha in her gentle, firm voice.

‘But you must remember that when the keys were removed from the Conscience, people had to make their own rules again.’

‘Has any man escaped from a charge of murder?’

‘No. But the scales are evenly divided.’ Altos looked at him steadily.

Ian relaxed a fraction. ‘Well, I hope the Doctor manages to tip them in my favour,’ he said.

Barbara and Susan stood outside the married quarters of Guard Officer Aydon. They were on the upper floor of a large, functional block of apartments. They pressed the bell. The door was opened by a pretty woman in her mid-twenties. She wore a simple, flowing robe and her hair was swept up in an elaborate chignon. She had quick, intelligent eyes and a firm mouth. Barbara imagined a strong personality lay beneath the gentle facade.

The woman welcomed them amiably and led them into a large but plain living room with a few pieces of modern-looking furniture.

‘I’m afraid my husband is not here at the moment,’

she explained, motioning the two women to be seated.

Barbara showed her disappointment. ‘I had hoped to talk to him,’ she said. ‘I thought he might have some facts that had been overlooked.’

The woman smiled at Barbara sympathetically. ‘I’m sure he’d want to help,’ she said warmly, ‘but he’s already told you everything he knows.’

‘It’s just possible there was some tiny thing...’

ventured Barbara, ‘... something he thought wasn’t important.’

Barbara felt the woman’s eyes appraise her from head to foot with a quick motion. ‘The guardians are very thorough, you know,’ said the woman. ‘Besides, Aydon would want the murderer to be caught. Eprin was a good friend of his.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Barbara glanced away then said,

‘Tell me, do you know why anybody would want to steal the micro-circuit?’

‘Because there are only five of them in the entire universe. It was

brought to the city many years ago by a man called Arbitan. It was the sworn duty of the Elders to protect it.'

'So they might pay highly to recover it?' queried Susan.

'Yes.' The woman smiled. 'But you know all this.

Why else would your friend steal it?'

Before Barbara could answer someone came into the apartment and entered the room. It was Aydon.

'I had to go to the guardian building again, they're asking...' He stopped on seeing Barbara and Susan.

'You're the people with Chesterton!' His thin face tightened. 'What are you doing here?'

'I wanted to talk to you,' said Barbara.

'I have nothing to say to you. Get out!' He motioned angrily to the door.

'Aydon!'

'I don't want people prying into my affairs. Has she been asking questions about me?'

Susan jumped up from the couch. 'Not as many as my Grandfather will ask when he calls you as a witness.'

Aydon grabbed Susan by the arm. 'Get out! You hear me. Get out!'

Susan broke away, her eyes blazing. 'I just thought you'd like to know that we know where the circuit is hidden.'

'Susan!' cried Barbara in horror.

Aydon stood stunned in the centre of the room.

Then, turning to face them, he said slowly, 'You know because Chesterton told you where he hid it. Now you're trying to throw suspicion on me. Well, it won't work.' He advanced aggressively towards Barbara and Susan. 'Get out before I...'

'Before you what?' repeated Barbara, bravely standing her ground.

‘Kill us? Just as you killed Eprin?’ cried Susan.

Aydon lifted a fist to strike Susan but his wife jumped in and restrained him. ‘You’d better go,’ she said quietly.

Without a further word Barbara and Susan left.

As they emerged from the apartment they heard angry shouting inside. There was a cry and an interior door was slammed roughly. Barbara bent down and peered through the keyhole. Directly in her line of vision on a small table in the hall was a push-button receiver. A hand, she couldn’t tell whose, lifted the receiver and started to tap out a number. At that moment Susan heard footsteps approaching. They could not afford to be caught spying and reluctantly they retreated along the corridor.

The Court was not in session and Larn, the Duty Officer, had been granted temporary leave of absence for a few hours. Eyson, the Representative of the Court, sat at his desk checking some documents against the daily Court Record. The telephone bleeped. Eyson picked up the receiver.

‘Eyson here,’ he announced in his haughty accent.

As he listened his eyes narrowed and he glanced uneasily around the ante-hall. A straggle of court officials came into view.

‘Don’t say anything else,’ he lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘There are people near. I’ll take it on the personal.’ He replaced the receiver and took up a miniature intercom unit instead.

‘Alright, go ahead.’ He listened for a full minute without saying a word. Then he said softly, ‘You really think she knows something? You think our friend might not be able to go through with it?’ His eyes narrowed.

‘Now listen carefully,’ he breathed, ‘this is what you may have to do...’

The next day the Court assembled in full session. The public seats in the main body of the courtroom were filled hours beforehand and an expectant buzz filled the air. At the appointed time the Court Clerks and their assistants, followed by the Counsels for Prosecution and Defence and the witnesses, took up their positions. Lastly, the three judges convened at the head of the U-shaped table and Ian was led in. He mounted the prisoner’s dais, looking tired.

Behind him to his left sat the Doctor, flanked by Sabetha and Altos. A pile of reference books lay on the table before them. As before, Tarron, the Chief Enquirer, sat midway between both counsels. Behind him, in the first row of spectators, the Doctor could see Barbara and Susan. To their right a few seats along, sat Aydon, the Treasury Vault guard, and his wife, Kala. Eyson, Representative for the Court was called and he began the case for the prosecution.

His speech was a more careful and detailed version of his previous exposition. But whereas on that occasion Eyson had adopted a cool, matter-of-fact tone he now began to couch his arguments more emotively, referring frequently and with haughty contempt to Ian as 'the murderer'. He succeeded in so colouring his presentation of the crime that a swell of indignation rose from the courtroom.

Arriving at his concluding peroration, Eyson picked up the spiked mace (recovered from the Treasure Vault and now neatly labelled on the exhibits table below the judges) and held it aloft for all to see.

'This mace!' he intoned, a look of simulated disgust on his face, 'is a weapon used by vicious, savage war-makers in primitive times. But the same savagery that wielded it then lives on! In men like the accused!' He pointed' the mace at Ian. 'Members of the Tribunal... the evidence already offered is more than enough to ensure the conviction of this man. But you must add to it the fact that,' his voice rose, 'under psychometric examination this mace was found to have been held in the right hand of the prisoner!' He glared triumphantly around the courtroom. 'I need say no more,' he added quietly. 'That concludes the case for the prosecution.' He returned to his seat and a wave of excitement ran through the room.

The Senior Judge called upon the Doctor. 'We will now hear a statement from the representative of the accused and convicted.'

The Doctor rose to his feet. Compared with the tall, resplendent figure of his opponent, the Doctor created an almost comical impression with his dusty frock-coat and straggly, long white hair. But his eyes, as they swept over the assembled courtroom, conveyed a powerful air of authority and a sudden hush fell on the room.

'Let me begin by saying that the murderer, without any doubt, is in this chamber.'

There was a loud gasp.

'The trouble is,' the Doctor continued, 'he is not under arrest, and my

young friend here, is.'

The Senior Judge leaned forward. 'Can you substantiate this?' He looked severe.

'I can.'

Another wave of astonishment flowed across the room.

'In a moment,' announced the Doctor in a loud voice, 'you will know his identity. Now I shall call my first witness.'

He motioned to Sabetha. She walked to the centre of the courtroom. From the table the Doctor selected a large blow-up picture of one of the keys.

'This is a reproduction of the stolen micro-circuit.'

He held it aloft.

Susan, leaning forward to gain a better view, suddenly noticed the guard Aydon fidgeting nervously in his seat.

The Doctor turned to Sabetha. 'Do you recognise it?' 'Yes.'

'Do you know where it is now?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then please tell the tribunal its present location.'

'Right here.' Sabetha held up the key for all to see.

There was a loud intake of breath from the rows of spectators. Again Susan noticed Aydon shifting uneasily.

'Will you tell me where you got it?'

'It was given to me by the man who killed the guard.'

'Is he here?'

'Yes.'

'Then please point him out.'

The courtroom fell completely silent.

‘There. Sitting in the front row.’ Sabetha pointed at Aydon.

The courtroom erupted. Aydon leaped from his seat and tried to reach the door, but was immediately enveloped in a milling throng. Tarron and Eyson fought their way towards him, as did his wife, Kala.

‘She couldn’t have found it,’ yelled Aydon as the crowd jostled him. ‘I hid it too well.’ A desperate, hunted look came over his thin face. ‘I’m not alone in this,’ he burbled, ‘they made me do it... I’ll tell...’

From within the crowd around him there came a spurt of blue flame. There was a chilling scream and for a moment Aydon’s body hung in the air, its convulsed shape etched against the watching faces by a peculiar light. Then the dead man slumped to the ground. The crowd fell back horrified. Beside the body, as if by magic, appeared a ray-pistol, undoubtedly the murder weapon dropped by someone in the throng.

Susan fought her way through the crowd. She caught sight of Tarron, Eyson, and Larn, all near the dead man. Then, a stifled sob rent the air and Kala fell, weeping over the body.

An hour later order had been restored to the courtroom. The body had been removed and Kala assisted from the scene.

The Doctor, Eyson, and the three judges were conferring informally at the front of the room.

‘And so you see,’ explained the Doctor, ‘the micro-circuit that Sabetha showed to the court was not in actual fact the one stolen from the vault.

The Senior Judge looked at him gravely. ‘You say you have three of the circuits in your possession?’

‘Yes. We came here to recover the last one. They will then all be returned to Arbitan.’

The Senior Judge sniffed. ‘The fact remains that the fourth circuit is missing.’

‘Still in the place where it was hidden by the murderer Chesterton,’ said Eyson.

‘Surely you don’t still believe he’s guilty,’ the Doctor remarked cuttingly. ‘I admit we resorted to a subterfuge when Sabetha accused

Aydon of giving her the key, but I think the results justified our means.'

The Senior Judge broke in. 'There are a number of other points that we would like cleared up.' He consulted a list and began detailing them one by one.

Across the well of the court Tarron was explaining his next move to the others.'... and I'm having psychometric tests made on the weapon that killed Aydon.'

'Psychometric tests?' queried Ian.

'Yes. Experts are able to divine from an object the characteristics of the person who last had contact with that object.'

'Whoever killed Aydon,' said Ian, 'must have been connected with the theft. If he'd lived a little longer he might have told us everything.'

'It was his wife I felt sorry for,' said Barbara. 'It must have been an awful shock, first of all to learn he was a murderer, then to see him killed right in front of her...'

She shivered.

'The doctors have given her oblivator drugs and taken her home to rest,' explained Tarron.

Their attention was interrupted by a signal for the court to reconvene. As everyone settled in their seats Altos whispered to Barbara: 'Where's Susan?'

'Gone to get Ian's statement.'

Ian had returned to the prisoner's dais. The Senior Judge waited for silence, then commenced. 'It is clear that Aydon was involved in either the theft or the killing.

It is also clear that he had an accomplice. Bearing in mind that the accused came here with the express purpose of recovering the micro-circuit, and remembering the evidence against him, his guilt becomes even more obvious. Will the prosecutor please summarise.'

Eyson rose and addressed the court.

'Despite the dramatics and hysterics of recent events,' he nodded sombrely towards the spot where the killing had occurred, 'very little

has changed. I submit that the accused, did, by threat or coercion, involve Aydon in robbery and murder. His dying words were,

“They made me do it”.’ He glanced at the front row of spectators where Barbara and the others were seated.

‘“They” are the accused and his companions. “They”

were standing near Aydon when he was killed. One of them is responsible for his death. Which one, we will know when the Guardian division have completed their tests. I submit that the defence has offered no new evidence, and that the sentence of the tribunal be carried out.’ He sat down, flushed and breathing heavily with emotion.

At this moment Larn, the Duty Officer, made his way to the front and beckoned to Barbara and the others.

Relieved to get away from the public’s gaze they quickly followed him.

Outside in the hall Larn handed Barbara a sealed envelope. ‘A messenger brought this for you,’ he said and returned to his desk.

Inside the envelope was a note in an unknown hand. ‘What is it?’ asked Sabetha.

‘It says, “There will be another death if you disclose where the circuit is hidden”!’

Altos grabbed the paper. ‘Barbara, do you see what this means? It proves there is somebody else involved.

We must show this to Tarron and the Doctor.’

Barbara pondered a moment. ‘But what does it mean... “another death”... Whose death?’

A buzzer sounded on Larn’s desk. He called Barbara across. ‘Someone wishes to speak to you.’ Larn handed her the receiver and moved off towards the courtroom.

‘Hallo?’ said Barbara hesitantly.

A female voice, frightened, sounded in her ear. ‘I want to speak to Barbara Wright.’.

‘Susan?’

‘They made me call you.’

Barbara gripped the speaker tightly. ‘Who? Susan!

Who?’

There was a pause then Susan’s voice came through again, loud and urgent. ‘Barbara, listen it’s the...’ The rest was muffled.

‘Susan... Susan... Are you there?...’

There was a long pause then Susan’s voice, whispering but clear, said, ‘They’re going to kill me.’

The line went dead. Barbara slowly replaced the receiver, white-faced.

11

The Missing Key

‘We must tell Tarron,’ urged Sabetha.

‘No! The Doctor must have his mind clear to concentrate on Ian.’ Barbara lowered her voice. ‘Besides, how do we know Tarron isn’t implicated? Who’d suspect the Chief Enquirer? He was near Aydon when he was killed.’

‘So what do we do?’

Barbara thought hard, then said, ‘Aydon was the only one we know for certain was connected with the crime. That’s why he was killed. He must have been in contact with the others when they were planning the robbery. His wife might recall someone he was seeing a lot of?’

‘If she does, do you think she’ll tell us?’ It was Altos who spoke. ‘She must be as keen to find the man that killed her husband as we are.’

This point was agreed and they hurried off to interview Kala immediately.

Meanwhile the judges inside the courtroom had reached their conclusion. The Senior Judge rose and addressed the Court. ‘The Tribunal concurs with the case of the prosecution. While it has deprived us of more detailed evidence, the unfortunate death of

Guardian Aydon has not affected the central issue.' A ghost of a smile flitted across the Chief Prosecutor's face. The judge turned to the Doctor. 'We will hear the closing statement for the defence.

The Doctor stood up. 'I must beg the indulgence of the tribunal and ask for time to prepare new evidence.'

'Denied. No purpose would be served in delaying these proceedings further. If you have nothing to add, the accused will be taken from here and executed in the prescribed manner.'

Ian suddenly swayed as if about to fall. A guard helped him regain his balance. Ian shot the Doctor a desperate glance. The Doctor gave a hopeless shrug of the shoulders in reply. He knew it would now take a miracle to save Ian.

Ian was led from the courtroom and placed in a different cell, devoid of furniture. No mirror, washbasin, bed or stool, no window, no light. A heavy metal door, six inches thick, was all that broke the monotony of the concrete walls. This was the death cell.

Through a small porthole in the door Ian could see a clock in the corridor. The dial was divided into starred segments. There was a single hand. A uniformed guard was posted outside.

'How long do I have?' Ian asked.

'Execution is set for the time when the pointer reaches the big star.'

Ian calculated he had three or four hours left to live.

Aydon's wife paced her flat nervously. Several times she stopped by the phone but fought back the impulse to dial. Finally, she sat before a mirror and began applying make-up to her tear-stained face.

She was interrupted by the door-bell. Puzzled, she rose and went to answer it.

'You!' Kala fell back in surprise at the sight of Barbara, Sabetha and Altos.

'I'm sorry to come here at a time like this,' Barbara apologised. 'We know what a terrible ordeal you've been through, but we think you can help us.'

Kola's bright gaze flicked across their faces, betraying no emotion. 'I

don't think so. I know nothing.'

'Please. May we come in?'

A moment's pause, then, 'If you must.' Kala ushered them into the living room.

'Thank you,' said Barbara. Turning to Kala with a serious look, she said, 'The people who killed your husband have kidnapped Susan, the young girl who was with our party.'

'They've threatened to kill her too,' added Altos.

'We thought you might recall someone your husband had been seeing a lot of.'

Kala regarded the earnest face of the young man for a few moments, then replied, 'I know of no-one. My husband was very secretive. He didn't tell me who he saw or where he went.' Her lower lip trembled and suddenly she was fighting back the tears. 'Now, please... Aydon is dead... If he has committed a crime, he's paid for it... but I'll have to live with the memory of his crime for the rest of my life.' She looked away, stifling a sob.

'I'm sorry,' said Barbara gently, 'but you see, you're our only hope.'

Kola crossed the room and stood with her back to them, twisting her fingers nervously. 'Leave me alone,'

she said quietly and with dignity. 'I do understand and I sympathise with you. You must have been sick with worry since you spoke to her, but I just can't help you.' She turned away, her face tear-stained and grief-stricken. 'I know nothing.'

There was an embarrassed silence, then Barbara said, 'I'm sorry. You understand, we had to try.'

The woman nodded and they left the room.

Kala remained motionless until she heard the outer door close, then her face broke into a slow, evil grin. She stepped quickly to a bedroom door and threw it open.

Inside, roped to a chair, was Susan, her mouth tightly gagged with sticky-tape.

'Your friends were here looking for you,' said the older woman. 'No...

don't look hopeful.' She smiled.

'They've gone and won't be back. They're like the rest of them. Stupid.' She gave a bitter laugh.

Suddenly the telephone rang. Susan's eyes followed the sway of Kala's elegant body across the living room and into the hall.

'Yes?'

Susan strained to hear the caller's voice. It was a man's. 'The trial has just ended,' it said, faint and distorted. 'Chesterton is to be executed at the next zenith.' Susan's heart missed a beat.

'Good. The old man didn't say where the circuit was hidden?'

'No,' said the voice. 'I'm certain he doesn't know. I'll get it later, then come for you. Be ready.'

'I will. What about the child?'

Susan's eyes widened.

'She's no more use now. She can identify you. Kill her.'

'We must tell the Doctor about Susan,' said Altos as the three friends hurried back to the courtroom.

'We should have done it right away,' said Barbara, regretting every second of the delay she had caused 'I'll never forgive myself.'

Sabetha squeezed her hand reassuringly. 'I know what you mean. Susan sounded so afraid.'

Barbara halted and looked at her in amazement.

'What is it?'

'What you've just said! Kala couldn't have known!'

'Known what?'

'Kala said we must have been sick with worry since we spoke to Susan. How did she know we'd spoken to Susan. We've told no-one!'

The others stared at her.

‘Then...’ stuttered Altos, grasping the implication for the first time, ‘... then she must have been with her when she called!’

They turned and raced back towards Kala’s apartment.

Susan watched through the open door as Kala crossed to a drawer and took out a slim, metallic pistol. A vision of Aydon, convulsed and screaming in the court-room, flashed before Susan’s eyes. Kala approached her and carefully aimed the gun at the back of Susan’s head.

Then, suddenly, Susan glimpsed a movement behind Kala’s shoulder. Kala’s finger was on the trigger when Altos knocked her arm upwards and wrenched the gun away. In the same instant Barbara pinioned her other arm and together they dragged her back across the room.

‘Let me go! Let me go!’

Kala kicked and spat like an alley cat before collapsing, weeping, to the floor.

The Doctor sat hunched on a bench in the Court corridor, staring morosely at the tiled floor. The Chief Enquirer, Tarron, was busy at the desk leafing through a pile of official-looking papers.

Eyson, the Prosecuting Counsel, emerged from the courtroom still holding his notes. He caught sight of the dejected figure of the Doctor in the corner and stepped over to him.

‘Don’t take it too hard,’ he said.

‘Eh? What?’ The Doctor snapped out of his reverie and became aware of the tall, condescending presence of his opponent. ‘Oh, it’s you,’ he said.

‘You did a fine, job on the defence. Of course you never had a hope.’

‘I’m afraid you did a better job on the prosecution,’

replied the Doctor generously.

Eyson bowed at the compliment. ‘I’m sorry we couldn’t have met under happier circumstances,’ he said.

‘Goodbye.’ He bowed again and moved away to the desk.

The Doctor nodded politely but his attention was on the pile of

exhibits which Larn, the Court Duty Officer, was carrying out of the courtroom. They included the blow-up photograph of the micro-key and the mace.

Larn took them to Tarron at the desk.

'Excuse me. The exhibits and documents, sir. Where do you want them?'

'In there for now.' Tarron indicated a large cupboard beside the desk.

Larn nodded and started stowing the exhibits away.

Eyson gathered up his odds and ends and prepared to leave. 'Well, I don't think there's anything else.' He smiled at Tarron, bowed politely towards the Doctor once more, and moved off down the corridor.

Tarron waited for Larn to lock the cupboard, then crossed to the Doctor's bench. 'Time to leave, I'm afraid.'

'Leave?' The Doctor rose, agitated. 'No, no. Can't leave now. We must find new evidence. Re-open the case...'

For the first time, something near to pity appeared on the face of the elegant young Inquisitor. He was about to speak when the telephone rang on the desk. Larn answered.

A woman's voice said, 'I'd like to speak to Chief Enquirer Tarron.'

Larn signalled to Tarron who took the receiver.

'This is Tarron.'

'This is Barbara Wright speaking. Have you received the test results on the gun that killed Aydon?'

Tarron frowned. 'Not yet.'

'Well just to save time I'll tell you what they say.

Aydon was killed by his wife Kala.'

'What?' Tarron's expression registered complete astonishment.

'I'm with her now. Why don't you come and get her.' There was a sharp click.

Tarron hesitated, wondering whether or not to believe what he had just heard, then motioned to Larn.

'Come on.'

The two men hurried out of the building.

A short time later the Doctor was reunited with Altos and the three women. After the story of Susan's rescue had been related to him, the Doctor reminded them that all was not yet resolved. Ian remained under sentence of death.

'But surely they'll stop the execution now that Kala's confessed,' insisted Altos.

'I hope so,' said the Doctor.

At this moment Tarron reappeared.

'Well?' demanded the Doctor.

'Kala has made a full statement. She has named her accomplice.'

'Then you can stop the execution!'

'No,' replied Tarron. 'I can't. Kala's sworn testimony states that the man she was working with was Ian Chester-ton.'

'Impossible!' retorted the Doctor.

'She's lying!' cried Barbara.

'I have doubts myself,' said Tarron calmly. 'She is a vicious, dangerous woman. But doubts alone are not reason enough to ask for a stay of execution. That will only be granted with the furnishing of positive proof.'

Susan looked at him incredulously. 'But what about the man she talked to on the telephone. I heard him. He told her to kill me.'

Tarron considered a moment. 'Did you recognise his voice?'

Susan went over the sequence in her mind. There had been something familiar about the voice, but it had been so distant and distorted. 'Not really,' she answered at last.

'What else did he say?' asked the Doctor.

‘Nothing much. Just that he’d collect the micro-circuit and pick up Kala later.’

The Doctor’s face brightened. ‘He said he’d collect the key?’

‘Yes.’

The Doctor gave a little laugh of triumph.

‘Splendid! Absolutely perfect.’

Tarron looked perplexed. ‘I don’t see what you have to be pleased about.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘There’s a lot in this whole affair that you haven’t seen, my friend. The important thing is this. The villain who masterminded all—the one responsible for the whole affair—is planning to collect the key. And that means we have a chance to capture him and save Chesterton.’

The city of Millenium lay shrouded in darkness. Here and there groups of Guardians patrolled the otherwise deserted streets. At the far end of Central Avenue the Capitol building towered high into the sky, pale and ghostly in the greenish-blue light of the night. Inside the building, the courtroom, scene of the day’s eventful drama, now stood bare and lifeless like an empty stage.

The ante-chamber also wore a cold, desolate air. It was only the daily to and fro of Court business which imbued it with character.

The silence was broken by the approach of stealthy footsteps. The doors outside the courtroom were slowly pushed open and a hooded figure slipped through. The figure moved cautiously towards the exhibits cupboard by the desk and tried a number of keys before finding the correct one and opening the door. The figure reached inside and withdrew the heavy mace.

Then, the lights came on and an explosion of movement filled the room. Tarron and Larn leaped from behind the desk. There was a fierce struggle before the hooded stranger was subdued.

The intruder stood motionless as the Doctor stepped up to him and whisked away the hood.

‘You!’

There were gasps of astonishment from Tarron and Larn. They were holding none other than the Chief Prosecutor and Representative of the Court, Eyson himself! 'Call the prison!' ordered Tarron. Shocked and speechless, Officer Larn crossed to the desk and did as he was bid.

The Doctor reserved his ' *pièce de resistance*' for the following morning. Ian was released and together with Tarron, Larn, Barbara and Susan, was summoned to the court anteroom. At the Doctor's bidding they all gathered around Larn's desk. The Doctor opened the cupboard and took out the mace. Then, holding it at arm's length he clicked open the end with a flourish. The spiked sphere split like a grapefruit into two neat halves. Inside was the fourth key of Marinus!

'The circuit!' cried Susan.

Ian looked at the Doctor in amazement. 'How did you know it was there?'

'It had to be,' replied the Doctor briskly: 'I've known all along where it was. But till now the information was of no use to us.'

'Inside the murder weapon!' repeated Tarron in disbelief. 'Everyone and everything that went in or out of that vault was checked. Everything except this!' He shook his head dolefully, like a schoolboy who has failed an exam.

'Have you any idea why they did it?' enquired Barbara.

'Yes. They've admitted the whole thing. Kala and Eyson planned to steal the key and sell it. Chesterton here just happened to walk into the middle of things.

They made him look so guilty I never doubted for a moment that he was.'

'Ah!' The Doctor wagged a reproving finger at the Chief Enquirer. 'You should read the teachings of Pyrrho. He founded scepticism. A great asset in your job.'

Ian gripped the Doctor's hand warmly. 'All I can say, Doctor, is... thank heaven you've read Pyrrho.'

'Read him?' snapped the Doctor. 'What are you talking about? I met him.'

Everybody laughed and Susan took the Doctor's arm. 'Now we can

join Sabetha and Altos.'

'Yes, where are they?' enquired Ian.

'I sent them on ahead,' said the Doctor. 'I thought our little success might cheer Arbitan up.'

'It will be wonderful for him to see his daughter again,' said Barbara.

Larn, who had been called away, returned to say that the Senior Judge had granted them permission to take the key.

The Doctor turned to Tarron. 'All we need now, my friend is the wrist-strap you impounded from Chesterton.' Tarron went to a drawer in the desk and handed it over. 'I see you all wear them,' he observed. 'Are they the mark of some guild to which you belong?'

The Doctor smiled. 'No, they are our means of transport. They give us movement through space. A trifle primitive, but efficient.'

Tarron looked across at Larn. 'I don't believe it.'

The Doctor turned to Ian. 'Show him, Chesterton.' Ian glanced at the two girls. 'All right?'

They nodded. Ian gave the signal and the three vanished simultaneously.

'I don't understand,' stammered Larn. 'Where have they gone?' He peered behind the desk in amazement.

'I suppose I'd better join them,' said the Doctor.

'You won't find them there, you know. Goodbye, my friends!'

Larn looked up to see the Doctor's eyes twinkling at him mischievously. The next instant he was gone. Larn slowly shook his head. 'He's disappeared too!'

Tarron looked equally incredulous. 'He said what was going to happen and we saw it.' He drew closer to Larn and lowered his voice. 'But nobody else has seen it.

I think we'd better keep the story to ourselves, Larn.'

Larn nodded. Trying to prove such a tale under the rigorous laws of Millenium might prove a foolish endeavour. 'How are you going to

complete the report, Chief Enquirer,' he asked.

Tarron brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his uniform. 'I'll say they...' he searched carefully for the right word, '... left. They left to return the micro-key to its inventor, Arbitan.'

He smiled at Larn with the satisfied air of a man who has solved a hitherto insoluble problem.

12

Arbitan's Revenge

Altos sat strapped in a chair in the Archive Room of Marinus. The ropes cut into his bare arms and legs.

Hovering over him like a large vulture was a hooded stranger. The stranger wore Arbitan's long robe and took great pains to keep his face and body hidden beneath the heavy folds. Even so Altos had caught glimpses of dark leathery limbs and a snoutish protuberance from under the hood. The unknown figure was flanked by two more 'creatures' whom Altos recognised from previous descriptions. They were Voords, ancient and dreaded enemies of Marinus.

He had materialised in the marble City ahead of Sabetha. Two of the creatures had attacked him in a dark alley and dragged him, struggling, to their master, who now stood before him, hostile and menacing. He addressed Altos in a harsh, rasping voice. 'Arbitan is dead. I, Yartek, am now in control.'

Altos winced at this brutal announcement of Arbitan's fate. His thoughts went out to the old man's beautiful daughter. 'What have you done to Sabetha?' he asked quietly. His face was bruised and he spoke with difficulty.

The hooded figure ignored the question. 'Where is the fourth key?'

'I don't know.' Altos stared defiantly to the front.

Yartek signalled to the two Voords. They slipped from the room. He returned to Altos.

'Why are you so stubborn? What purpose does it serve? I am going to find out in the end?

Altos remained impassive. 'What have you done with Sabetha?' he

repeated.

Yartek made no answer. A moment later Sabetha was led in by the two Voords. She looked pale but unharmed. Altos noticed the chain with the keys was missing from her neck.

The two gazed at each other in silence, unsure how to react. Altos was struck by Sabetha's regal composure.

There was a sense of authority about her which reminded him of her father.

He was about to speak when she turned to Yartek and said coldly, 'Why have you tied him up? He's of no use to you. He is just a servant. He knows nothing.'

The Voord eyed her cunningly. 'He means nothing to you?'

'I have no thoughts about him at all. I told you, he's just one of my servants. Let him go.'

'Sabetha?' Altos looked bewildered.

'Be quiet! I did not give you permission to speak. I tell you, he knows nothing,' she repeated to Yartek.

Yartek pondered for a second. 'In that case, if you think so little of him, as I gather you do from your way of treating him, it does not matter what happens to him.'

'Of course not. Send him away.' She made a dismissive gesture towards Altos.

'Yes, I can do that,' replied Yartek silkily. He moved behind Sabetha and drew close to her ear. 'Or I can have him killed.' Altos saw Sabetha stiffen. 'After all,'

continued Yartek insinuatingly, 'he's only a servant.'

Sabetha's lip quivered and she closed her eyes. Altos saw she had been playing a game and that this sly, sub-human had outwitted her.

The hooded creature turned to one of the guards.

'Kill him!'

The Voord drew his knife.

‘No!’ shrieked Sabetha.

Altos braced himself, imagining the cold steel plunging into his neck. Instead, there was an agonising pause as Yartek stayed the blow with a wave of his arm.

‘Useless lies.’ He spat the words angrily at Sabetha’s face. ‘Where is the fourth key?’

‘I’ll never tell you. Never!’ Her eyes blazed with hatred.

‘But this man is no servant,’ sneered Yartek. ‘He has travelled with you.’ He peered mockingly into Altos’s face. ‘He is in love with you. I think he will tell me.’

Altos fought to contain his rage. How dare this creature, this sub-species, this frog-like abomination presume to know anything of human affections? And yet, despite his anger, Altos realised the Voord had perceived what he himself had kept hidden. He was in love with Sabetha and had been for some time. The shared dangers had brought them closer. And yet he had feared admitting it, even to himself, in case she should not return his love.

‘The man who loves me cannot betray me,’ said Sabetha in a level voice.

‘The man who loves you,’ reiterated the Voord with Machievellian cunning, ‘cannot condemn you to death.’

He turned to Altos. ‘I can promise you one thing. Unless you tell me where the fourth key is, I shall order my creatures to kill her.’

For Altos, Time stood still. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, his throat went dry. How could he condemn the country he loved to pernicious tyranny?

How could he condemn the woman he loved to instant death? He heard himself reply, ‘The man who was with us, the Doctor. He has the key.’

Sabetha hid her face in her hands. Yartek gave what passed for a smile.

Ian, Barbara and Susan had materialised safely in a group in one of the many corridors in the marble City.

The travel bracelets should have brought them back within reach of the Archive Room but without Altos and Sabetha to guide them they were making slow progress.

Suddenly Ian held up a hand for silence. Someone, or something was approaching. A strange shuffling, tapping noise grew nearer.

The next instant the Doctor rounded a corner and bumped straight into them. He leaped backwards, dropping his stick with shock.

'Sorry,' said Ian with a grin.

'You frightened the life out of me,' snapped the Doctor. He retrieved his stick and brushed himself down.

'Is the TARDIS alright, Grandfather?' enquired Susan sweetly.

'The force field has gone. I peered in briefly and everything was in order.'

'Arbitan must have kept his promise,' said Barbara.

The Doctor grunted, then waved his stick at them in annoyance. 'Come on, come on. You're all wandering about here like a lot of farmyard chickens.'

'We were waiting for you,' said Ian.

'And now I'm here!' retorted the Doctor. 'Really, Chesterton, you are irritating at times.'

'Don't be tetchy, Grandfather,' said Susan. She led him off down the corridor. The others followed.

After a while Barbara said, 'You know it's a bit odd that Sabetha wasn't here to meet us.'

'Or Altos,' added Ian.

They continued without further conversation but neither could shrug off the nagging thought that something had gone wrong.

Yartek stood before the large, spheroid structure in the Archive Room. The Conscience of Marinus it had once been called. He admired its elegant lines. Thousands of years of technological skill had been distilled into this sleek, sophisticated machine, the enticing repository of all power and knowledge on Marinus. The Conscience had been

Yartek's lifetime adversary, the immutable obstacle between himself and his overriding ambition, control of Marinus. His secret Immuniser had once nulified but not destroyed the machine's regulation of the planet. In the intervening years the Keepers had reversed the effect of the Immuniser so that, with the keys in place, the machine would once again exert its full power over all living creatures on the planet. Yartek's dream, to harness this energy and might for his own evil ends, was now within reach.

But the concealment of the keys had been Arbitan's masterstroke, his trump card after death. For without *all* the keys the machine was useless. This had been Arbitan's gift of foresight to his beloved planet. He could not have predicted the cruel twists of circumstance which had now brought all but one of the keys into the grasp of his implacable foe.

Yartek lovingly turned the gleaming micro-circuits in his hands, then began inserting them into the machine. A Voord entered and said, 'I have put them in the cell as ordered.'

Yartek nodded. 'Keep out of sight. But be within call.' The Voord shuffled out obediently.

Yartek slotted in the last key and stood back from the machine. 'One more,' he said to himself quietly, 'Just one more!'

The Doctor led the way along the corridor. The steady tap of his walking-stick echoed on the marbled floor.

Suddenly he motioned for silence. The Doctor's acute hearing had been alerted by a faint sound ahead. Ian moved up alongside him. They had reached a junction.

As they waited a Voord stepped around the corner, almost bumping into them. Ian grabbed him and smashed him against the wall. The Voord's bullet-shaped head hit the marble with a sickening thud and he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

They gazed down at the repulsive creature.

'This may explain what has become of Sabetha and Altos,' said the Doctor gravely. 'We'll have to split up and search for them.'

'I'll try and find Arbitan,' said Ian. 'Give me the key, Doctor.'

The Doctor handed it over. 'Don't part with it until you're sure it's in

the right hands.'

'I won't. Susan, you come with me.' The two of them sped off down the corridor before the Doctor had time to protest.

He turned to Barbara. 'Very well. You shall accompany me, my dear.'

Barbara knelt down and removed the Voord's knife.

'I'll take this,' she said. 'Just in case.'

Altos and Sabetha were taken to a cold dark cell below ground and roped together. Neither spoke for several minutes. Altos could feel the warmth of Sabetha's body seeping through to his. He pictured her face, sad and beautiful in the darkness and the image summoned up his protective instincts. He tugged furiously at the ropes binding his wrists but the thick cord only bit deeper into his flesh.

Sabetha's voice reproved him gently. 'What's the use? Even if we untie ourselves we'll never break the door down.'

Altos choked back his frustration. 'At least I could defend you.'

Sabetha turned her head slightly so that her cheek just touched his. 'You're with me, Altos,' she whispered.

'That's all that matters.'

'I shall never leave you,' he replied, and his voice trembled.

After several detours Ian and Susan eventually found their way to the Archive Room. They had seen no more Voords and hoped to find Arbitan still guarding the Conscience.

The room was just as they had left it. The machine stood like a colossal modern sculpture in the centre. In a chair in the shadows, was a crouching figure. A heavy cowl masked his face.

'Arbitan,' said Susan softly.

The hunched figure made a slight movement of acknowledgement.

Ian said, 'So, you're alright. We were afraid...'

'Have you brought the key?'

There was something odd about Arbitan's voice. It was sharper, more

anxious.

‘Where’s Sabetha?’ enquired Ian.

‘Where is the old man?’ countered the hooded figure. ‘He is the one who has the key.’

Susan felt herself growing angry. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ she burst out. ‘We’ve done all these things for you and all you can think about...’

The hooded figure interrupted her. ‘Forgive me.

The keys have filled my mind for so long that I have become insensitive to anything else. Sabetha is safe and well.’ Ian moved in closer. ‘Do you know the Voord are still...’ ‘Stop!’ commanded the hooded figure. ‘Do not come near me. Power from my machine escaped. I am suffering from a dreadful disease.’

Susan peered more closely at the hunched figure.

‘Can we do anything?’

‘Sabetha alone knows the cure.’

‘Where’s Altos?’ asked Ian.

‘The young man who attached himself to her while she was away?’ The hooded figure shifted in the chair. ‘Is he a good man? Is he sincere in his feelings?’

Ian looked puzzled. ‘What are your impressions?’

He phrased the question slowly.

‘There are many races on Marinus. He looks and sounds well enough but...’

Ian said, ‘Naturally we like and admire him. But he is a stranger to you. You must make up your own mind.’

‘I agree. But the key? The final key? Do you have it?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Ian!’ whispered Susan in alarm.

‘I have it here,’ said Ian, ignoring her.

‘Throw it down.’

Ian dug in his pocket and took out the key. He examined it for a moment then tossed it at Arbitan’s feet.

‘Good. Now bring the old man to me. Sabetha will be here and we can enjoy our triumph.’

‘He’s on the glass beach,’ lied Ian quickly. ‘We’ll fetch him.’ He motioned to Susan and they hurried from the room.

After they had left the hooded figure picked up the key. A Voord materialised from the shadows.

‘Shall I follow and destroy them?’

‘No. The Machine will enslave them. Bring Sabetha and the young man to me. I want them here when the last key is inserted and my’power is absolute.’

The Voord bowed and left. Yartek leaped from his chair. Holding the key aloft, he laughed a high-pitched girlish giggle, and began to caress the side of the machine.

Ian and Susan stopped in the corridor at a safe distance from the Archive Room.

‘He wasn’t Arbitan,’ whispered Susan, ‘He couldn’t have been.’

‘Right. We know Arbitan sent Altos in search of the keys. This one is saying Altos is a stranger. That’s why he kept in the shadows all the time. I thought it was odd.’

‘Why did you give him the key?’

Before Ian could reply there was a cry and Barbara came running towards them, distraught.

‘The Voords have captured the Doctor,’ she gasped.

‘They’re everywhere!’

Ian grabbed the two women and pulled them into an alcove. Seconds later a phalanx of Voords marched past. When they were safely gone Barbara continued her story. She had followed the Doctor’s captors as far as she could. He had been led underground, to a dungeon she thought. Ian asked her to retrace her steps and the three of them

hurried off.

The Doctor had in fact been placed in the same cell as Sabetha and Altos. He had listened with growing concern to their story, of Arbitan's murder and of the Voord invasion.

'If Yartek gets the final key his power will be absolute.'

Altos nodded. 'With the aid of the machine he could control us all.'

The Doctor tugged at his chin thoughtfully. 'Our impulse to leave this planet would be destroyed.'

'That is true,' said Sabetha. The Doctor could not see her face in the dark but the dead tone of her voice reminded him of all she had been through that day.

They were interrupted by a key in the lock. The door swung open and a Voord stepped inside. He motioned them to their feet.

Then things happened very rapidly. There was a blur of movement in the doorway, the sound of a violent blow, and the Voord chopped to the floor like a stone.

Ian, looking flushed, stepped over the prostrate guard and greeted the astonished trio. Behind him came Barbara and Susan. Barbara slipped across to Sabetha and Altos and hacked them free with the knife she was carrying.

'You know about Arbitan!' barked the Doctor.

Ian nodded. 'We met the man who is taking his place.'

'Give me the key, Chesterton, we must destroy it.'

'Ian gave it to him,' said Susan.

'What?' The Doctor thrust his nose against Ian's face. 'You gave it away?'

Ian laughed nervously. 'I gave him *a* key. Do you remember that fake key? Barbara, you found it on top of that idol.'

'Of course I remember.'

'Well that's the one I gave him. Here's the genuine one.' He held up the micro-circuit.

The Doctor's face creased into a broad smile.

'Chesterton, I congratulate you.'

Sabetha addressed them urgently. 'We must go.

Quickly. Leave the building!'

'Why?' asked Ian.

Altos took his arm. 'Yartek may put that false key into the Conscience any moment. It will bring the machine back to life, but once it feels the full force of power it will break under the strain.'

Ian stared at him in horror. 'You mean the machine will blow up?'

Altos nodded. 'And everything inside the building with it.'

The Doctor was the first to move. 'Come on,' he yelled, 'The wall-doors. It's our only chance.' They tumbled out of the cell and ran towards the upper levels of the City.

'Somewhere here,' panted the Doctor as he reached the spot where he had 'fallen' through the wall.

'It was a small stone. It moved under my hand.'

As they scoured the wall like blind men a Voord observed them silently from behind a pillar. A moment later the Voord entered the Archive Room. Yartek leaped angrily to his feet. 'Why haven't you obeyed my commands?' he hissed. 'Where is Sabetha?'

'The others have set them free. They are in the upper corridor.' The guard trembled beneath Yartek's hideous gaze.

'She has told them of her father's death of course.'

Yartek glanced down at the micro-key in his hand. A smile illuminated his lurid features. 'The machine's power will spread through the planet. There is no escape. Except for us.' He turned slyly to the guard and waved the key in the air. 'I shall bring them back with this.' He moved triumphantly towards the Machine, his bulbous eyes gleaming with exaltation. A lifetime's ambition was about to be realised. Years of patient scheming had brought Yartek to the threshold of absolute power. Within a few minutes he would control the machine, become master of Marinus, manipulator of all men's thoughts and actions, sole arbiter of good and evil, the undisputed, unassailable, untouchable

god-head!

He inserted the last key and stepped back.

The gleaming, crystalline structure began to hum and quiver like a glass bell. A red glow appeared at the centre, growing in intensity as the humming sound grew louder. Then, spokes of purple light radiated outwards along the delicate metal connectors until the entire structure blazed like a giant catherine wheel. Suddenly, the entire machine burst apart with the force of an exploding sun. In one millionth of a second Yartek's flesh was seared to the bone, and the bone reduced to ash. The room, the guard, and two hundred feet of surrounding masonry were simply scorched out of existence within the blink of an eye.

As Susan's fingers discovered the small indentation in the wall operating the hidden doorway there was an incredible explosion. The five travellers were hurled to the floor, buffeted by a wave of hot air which swept down the corridor. Seconds later, accompanied by a great roar, the roof began to collapse above them.

'Out! All of you,' yelled the Doctor as the door in the wall swung open. Stone debris rained down on them and swirling dust choked their lungs. One by one they scrambled through and emerged bruised and bewildered into the warm, night air. They hurried across the plateau and into the rocky terrain which led to the beach and the TARDIS. Behind them the pyramid city rumbled ominously. Large cracks zigzagged across the outer walls like scurrying lizards.

As they reached the safety of the shore, the earth began to shudder and, turning, they saw the apex of the pyramid topple. A tremendous spout of fire shot into the sky like a volcanic eruption. Molten rock cascaded down the outer walls and within minutes the entire edifice was a raging inferno, illuminating the heavens for miles around.

13

Final Goodbyes

'Everything alright, Grandfather?'

The Doctor appeared in the doorway of the TARDIS and gave Susan a sharp look. 'Go and hurry the others, will you?' he said.

Susan smiled to herself. The Doctor hated admitting that his capricious Time-Ship gave him trouble.

The Doctor waited until Susan was out of earshot, then turned to Sabetha. ‘I’m glad of this little moment alone with you,’ he said gently. ‘You don’t mind if I speak about your father?’

Sabetha shook her long blonde hair. ‘Please.’

The Doctor took her hand. ‘He was a wise and courageous man. His death must have been a great shock to you and the rest of your people.’

Sabetha nodded sadly. ‘His life’s work has been destroyed.’

‘No. I wouldn’t say that. Your father’s work will go on. Not in the same way, of course. I don’t believe men were made to be controlled by machines, my child. You see, a machine can make laws but it cannot preserve justice. Only human beings can do that.’ He tilted her chin. Sabetha looked into his laughing, friendly eyes.

‘Now it’s up to you and Altos to carry on the good work,’

he said. ‘Goodbye, my child, and bless you.’ He turned and entered the TARDIS.

Sabetha pondered on the Doctor’s words. There was hope and comfort in them. It was as if he knew what the future held for her. She felt calm and reassured.

Altos appeared with Susan, followed by Barbara and Ian. ‘What will you both do now?’ asked Susan, pausing beside the TARDIS door.

Altos glanced across at Sabetha and took her arm.

‘Return to the city of Millenium.’

Sabetha nodded. ‘We have our travel dials and it would be a good place to start.’ She thought of the Doctor’s words a few moments before.

‘What about this key?’ said Ian. ‘The one I didn’t give to Yartek.’

‘Why don’t you present it to the Doctor?’ suggested Altos. Ian looked at the small intricate piece of plastic in his hand and thought of the hardships it had caused. It was a bittersweet momento.

‘Alright,’ be said. ‘I will.’ He felt easier leaving it in the Doctor’s possession, even if it was quite useless.

‘Goodbye, Barbara, Susan, Ian,’ said Altos. The men shook hands, while the girls embraced.

‘Look after her, Altos,’ said Barbara.

The young Marinian looked lovingly at Sabetha and smiled. ‘You may rely on that.’

Altos and Sabetha watched as Ian and the two girls climbed into the strange blue box. Seconds later a white light started to flash on top, accompanied by a mysterious groaning noise. Then, gradually the rectangle of blue faded away in front of their eyes and they were alone on the empty beach.

Document Outline

- Front cover
- Rear cover
- Title page
- Copyright
- Contents
- 1 The Sea of Death
- 2 The Marble City
- 3 The Velvet Web
- 4 The Brains of Morphoton
- 5 The Screaming Jungle
- 6 The Whispering Darkness
- 7The Snows of Terror
- 8 The Demons
- 9 Sentenced!
- 10 The Mystery of The Locked Room
- 11 The Missing Key
- 12 Arbitan&#xFFFD;s Revenge
- 13 Final Goodbyes

Table of Contents

1 The Sea of Death
2 The Marble City
3 The Velvet Web
4 The Brains of Morphoton
5 The Screaming Jungle
6 The Whispering Darkness
7 The Snows of Terror
8 The Demons
9 Sentenced!
10 The Mystery of the Locked Room
11 The Missing Key
12 Arbitan's Revenge
13 Final Goodbyes